## UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

## COMMUNICATING POLICY REDEFINING INTEREST

A MIDTERM ESSAY IN
HIUS 106B PREPARED FOR
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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

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SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA FEBRUARY 2007 Internationalism and the pathway toward global hegemony marked the period between 1914 and 1950 in the history of United States foreign policy. This path neither began nor ended during this period. In the early years of its existence, American political elites sought the best interests for the nation, acting through both domestic and foreign policies. Moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as technology and communication improved, foreign policy increasingly came under the scrutinizing lens of public opinion. This amplified the need for American political leadership to provide justifications to engage in foreign policy to protect domestic values and security. As foreign policy became increasingly a matter of mass public concern, American political leaders found it necessary to influence public opinion to gain support for their own political, economic, and military interests, even if it meant redefining American core values.

In order to gain public support consistent with their own interests and foreign policy goals, political elites sought to prove that their "actions [were] imperative to protect domestic core values from external threats." Language was employed in ways that redefined both these core values and the forces that threaten them. In 1776, American core values were declared to be "certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The specific definition of these values at a given time determines what actions are necessary to protect them. In 1776, a Revolutionary War was determined to be the imperative action. In 1914, when the nations of Europe were engaged in the First Great War, it was deemed necessary to stay out of the war in order to protect American lives, liberties, and happiness. After the Progressive Era, Americans believed that civilization had advanced to the point that "war belonged to the decadent past." Even after the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915, President Woodrow Wilson was re-elected to office in 1916 using the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." In the next two years, as commercial interests became endangered, political elites sought to

export their idea that war had become inevitable, and was, in fact, consistent with the protection of American core values.

At the beginning of America's entrance to the war, language was used to convince Congress and the people that America's involvement was purely "for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured." In his request to Congress for a Declaration of War, President Woodrow Wilson depicted America's entrance as a "constitutional duty," not to declare war on Germany per se, but to "declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against [...] the United States." According to President Wilson's language, this was to be a war of defense, defending democracy and freedom. Only he redefined the United States' responsibility to protect the core values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to include not only the American people, but also the rest of the world. Wilson sought to "fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples," with the eventual goal wherein "the world must be made safe for democracy."<sup>7</sup> This global view certainly was not held at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, for it declared that "it is the right of the people [...] to effect their [own] safety and happiness, [...] and to provide new guards for their future security."8 No mention was made of securing such values for foreign nations by force, for such would be despotism, and directly contrary to the ideas therein professed. In his dissent, Senator Robert M. La Follette understood "that wars are usually forced upon all peoples," and he challenged the President's language of fighting for democracy, pointing out that most of America's allies contained governments "of the old order."9

The debate over American involvement in war was not new in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, President James K. Polk argued for westward expansion to protect "our safety and future peace," while Senator Daniel Webster protested the war on Mexico

Insinuating its purpose as "the acquisition of territory to form new States [...] as slaveholding States." Until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, however, national security debates were primarily held amongst political elites, while the public was dependent upon newspapers for information. Technology and communication improved in the decades ahead, and the public became increasingly informed of American foreign policy. By the beginning of the American Civil War, "the first transcontinental telegraph system was completed," followed by the telephone in the Reconstruction era, and eventually radio and motion pictures brought communication to entirely new levels in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The radio, in particular, gave American political elites their voice to spread their interests and propaganda. During World War I, Secretary of War Newton Diehl Baker broadcasted the reasons why the United States had engaged in the conflict. He called for America to "bring out of this war the flag of our country as untarnished as it goes in, sanctified and consecrated to the establishment of liberty, for all men who dwell on the face of the earth." The beginning of this phrase alone claims American involvement as untarnished. The latter portion again redefines American core values to be "wedded and devoted to the idea of international justice as the rule upon which nations shall live together in peace and amity upon the earth." Senator Warren G. Harding, soon to become the next president, also used the radio to incite public support for the war. His address reiterated President Wilson's claim that the war was defensive. Senator Harding claimed that it was the duty of all who "cherish[ed] the national rights the fathers fought to establish, and lov[ed] freedom and civilization, [...] to make the world safe for civilization." President Wilson's call to make the world safe for democracy was now being spread to the public ear through Senator Harding and the radio.

Communication of all forms became the podiums for partisan politics, and political elites found it necessary to use language and expression that would encourage the public to support

their interests. Not only was the radio used to spread war propaganda, but the printed press also became increasingly important as circulation became further nationalized. Those who opposed the war were made out to be traitors, as Senator La Follette was depicted in a *Life* magazine cartoon as receiving medals from the German Kaiser. Supporters of the war turned to the media and advertising, which provided a way to repeatedly sponsor the war in American homes. To support recruiting efforts and promote sales of war bonds and stamps [...], thousands of advertisers feature[d] war themes in their campaigns while the media contribute[d] space. By 1919, contributions total[ed] \$2.5 billion. This helped to incorporate the war into every day American life, thus redefining the need for peace, security and the pursuit of happiness through fighting a war for peace.

The effort by political elites to redefine American values was also aided by innovations in the transportation industry during this time. The first transcontinental railroad was completed after the Civil War, and the decades ahead saw further improvements with the automobile ushering in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. President Wilson was the first U.S. President to visit Europe while in office when he traveled to the Paris Peace Conference. Although before the war, President Wilson argued that it was "the right of every people to choose their own allegiance," his idea of a new world order dominated his goals. Putting America's core value of self-determination aside, Wilson wished to force his League of Nations on the world, including the United States. With foreign policy now in the eyes of a broader American public, Wilson chose to travel once again, this time on a speaking tour across the western United States. He traveled from city to city to declare, "America is necessary to the peace of the world." 19

The debate continued regarding the international role of the United States, and thus continued the fight for public opinion. In San Francisco, Wilson claimed that the world recognized American values in the "validity of the Monroe doctrine and acknowledge it as part

of the international practice of the world."<sup>20</sup> Wilson attempted to invoke the Monroe Doctrine in his rhetoric because he understood that concerns about national "sovereignty [were] immediately before the eyes of the people."<sup>21</sup> The Monroe Doctrine claimed American independence to act under circumstances involving peace in the western hemisphere, but the League of Nations Covenant required America to be bound to the "League [which] shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations."<sup>22</sup> To the American people, Wilson was arguing that the United States needed to sacrifice some of its sovereignty "to provide for the exigencies of the Union" of the world.<sup>23</sup> This would have been a redefinition of American Union from the national level to an international scale, a redefinition that the America public was not willing to receive.

Although President Wilson's vision of a League of Nations failed, American internationalism continued to expand during the following decade through yet another growing communication industry. With the growing popularity of American film throughout the world, Edward G. Lowry of the *Saturday Evening Post* proclaimed, "the sun, it now appears, never sets on the British Empire and the American motion picture." In 1925, Lowry recognized that "films directly influenced the currents of trade." A year later, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover declared that trade had become so vital as to have enabled the United States to "shift from a debtor to a creditor nation upon a gigantic scale." Hoover desired further foreign trade, claiming that it "contribut[ed] to peace and economic stability, [and that] by the spread of inventions over the world, we can contribute to the elevation of standards of living in foreign countries and the demand for all goods." This statement alone claims American living as the standard, as the United States extended its sphere of influence over the world through film.

As American culture spread throughout Europe by the means of film, so political elites used film to liken themselves to the standard of living of the American public. In 1924,

President Calvin Coolidge was filmed in scenes of various American activities. Coolidge was shown working on the farm and attending church, while the captions sponsored "the democracy of a great republican." <sup>28</sup> The film enabled Coolidge to be seen as a family man, while being the man who was the "master of the problems of Europe, eminently able to serve the world." <sup>29</sup> Technology had improved beyond communicating mere words and ideas, and political elites found it necessary to broadcast pictures depicting their lives in consistency with American core values in order to retain office and popular approval.

The two decades following WWI are often defined as a period of American isolationism. In order to determine whether this is an accurate description of the period, isolationism must first be defined. If it is used to define the American public's perception of events, then indeed it is an accurate term. If it is used to define actual American policies and actions, then it is an inaccurate description. The American people were isolated from foreign affairs, because they were disgusted with the continuing problems in Europe, and "popular sentiment held that World War I had been a tragic blunder."30 To avoid any further mistake, political elites focused the public attention on domestic issues, attempting to be inconspicuous in the conduct of international affairs. "Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge gave minimal attention to foreign affairs, leaving that field to their secretaries of state,"31 thereby distancing themselves from international entanglements in the public eye. As mentioned earlier, President Coolidge presented through film an image of himself in domestic chores. He "created a deceptively passive image,"32 deceptive because the actions of the United States during his presidency were powerful in Latin American intervention. In 1923, Argentine Writer Manuel Ugarte called the United States the "New Rome," claiming that American imperialism was evident in "the form of financial pressure, international tutelage, and political censorship."33 It was economic infiltration rather than land acquisition that marked American imperialism. Latin American nations were

also subject to "U.S. military occupation and the Good Neighbor policy," but American foreign relations remained foreign to the isolated American public. News media may have attempted to alert the public of the growing American "empire,"<sup>34</sup> as journalist Walter Lippmann called it in 1927, but the majority of communication was focused on domestic issues, including women's rights, prohibition, political campaigns, labor, and entertainment.

When the Great Depression engulfed the world with economic hardship, domestic issues became the primary focus during the 1930's, until participation in the war in Europe became increasingly likely. Once conflicts erupted in the middle of the decade, American political elites were forced to address the subject of possible American involvement. Once again, technology was used to immediately spread political ideas consistent with political elites' perception of necessary and appropriate actions in foreign policy to a broad American public. In a radio address delivered in January 1936, Senator Gerald P. Nye called for complete neutrality. He asked that "the confidence of the people of the land [...] make it extremely difficult for the United States to be drawn into another foreign war that becomes our war only because of selfish interests that profit from the blood spilled in the wars of other lands." As events continued to escalate on the global level, President Franklin D. Roosevelt felt it necessary to state his position. In a speech in Chicago the following year, Roosevelt stated his "determination to pursue a policy of peace." 36

Despite this peaceful resolve, Roosevelt's language continued to redefine American values, by expanding national security to include an international perspective. He charged that "international anarchy and instability" could not be ignored by "mere isolation or neutrality." He also demanded that "national morality is as vital as private morality," but then extended it further to argue it as "a matter of vital interest and concern to the people of the United States that […]

*international* morality be restored."<sup>37</sup> It was no longer a matter of merely protecting domestic values and security, but "of world economy, world security and world humanity."<sup>38</sup>

Three years after his speech in Chicago, President Roosevelt helped to redefine yet another American value, that of freedom of the seas. On September 11, 1941, President Roosevelt ordered that American "patrolling vessels and planes will protect all merchant ships – not only American ships but ships of any flag – engaged in commerce in our defensive waters." Roosevelt was invoking an American value stated in the Model Treaty, signed a century and a half earlier, "that free Ships shall also give a freedom to Goods." This principle of freedom of the seas was to protect commerce, but when it was written, it specifically referenced "Ships belonging to the Subjects of either of the Confederates," not any ship flying any flag. Before Japan had even attacked Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt was preparing for war; already claiming that America's mission was "solely defense," just as President Wilson claimed was America's involvement in the First World War.

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, it was obvious that an American war with Japan would be out of defense, but Roosevelt needed to reiterate this principle in his war message to Congress. Concluding his remarks, Roosevelt asked, "That the Congress declare [...] a state of war *has* existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire." He was not asking for a declaration of war against Japan, but a declaration that the war already existed. This was not a redefinition of an American principle, but certainly a reiteration of the American principle of just war. The United States declared its independence after listing "a long train of abuses and usurpations" by the British Crown. The very Declaration of Independence set the principle that "requires that they should declare the causes which impel them" to action. Again Roosevelt followed this requirement, while remaining within the range of the American core

values by acting out of defense of American life, liberty and national honor, but he also incorporated one point that would allow for future redefinition of this principle.

In his war address, President Roosevelt promoted a redefinition of American defense to include prevention of future conflict. He asserted "that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again."<sup>44</sup> This opened the way for an increased international platform for the United States to play the role of world police. This role would be discussed even before the war reached its conclusion. In 1943, President Roosevelt discussed with Marshal Stalin of the Soviet Union the plan of "a postwar organization to preserve peace."<sup>45</sup> This led to the formation of the United Nations, America's involvement in which was yet another redefinition of American values.

As American involvement in international affairs increased, the valued American tradition of avoiding permanent alliances in order to ensure American independence and sovereignty was also redefined. In his farewell address, President George Washington advised "conduct for us in regard to foreign nations [...] to have with them as little *political* connection as possible." President Roosevelt ignored this principle and made it his goal to unite with foreign nations in safeguarding peace. This goal was realized at the Yalta Conference when nations cooperated in building a "world order under law." Not only did Roosevelt's dream become reality, but Washington's nightmare also began to unfold. Washington warned that permanent alliances would only be "facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest [...], and infusing into one the enmities of the other, [...] exciting jealousy, ill will, and a disposition to retaliate." The differences between the United States and the Soviet Union facilitated this hostility and brought the United States into an even greater war: the Cold War.

Once America had become a leader in the international community, communication between nations required that political elites frame their language in ways consistent with

protecting international values and security. America's participation in two world wars effectively redefined domestic values and security to be dependent upon international stability. Roosevelt's successor, President Harry S. Truman appeared before Congress to declare his doctrine "that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation [...] to work out their own destinies in their own way."<sup>49</sup> Truman insisted that "the free peoples of the world look to us for support," and that "if we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world."<sup>50</sup> American values of freedom, capitalism, and self-determination were now applied and communicated to the world beyond the original model of a "City upon a Hill" to be emulated.<sup>51</sup> America now acted as a City whose reach extended far beyond the Hill, a City whose leaders believed their jurisdiction encompassed many Cities.

With the eyes of the world upon the United States, political elites also found it increasingly important to censor what was made public, and certain documents were deemed classified. Behind closed doors, the National Security Council formed policies of containment, to prevent Communist growth, whether by the Soviet Union or China. It would not have been wise to publicly declare that "our overall policy [...] may be described as one designed to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish." Instead, the publicly declared Marshall Plan stated the American objective as "the restoration or maintenance in European countries of principles of individual liberty, free institutions, and [...] the establishment of sound economic conditions." This objective extended to Asia as well, and the first battles of capitalism versus communism were waged.

The United States' willingness to engage militarily to fight communism was presented to the American public as a defensive situation, but behind closed doors, America's strategy was nothing less than offensive. In his speech defining defense perimeters in Asia, Secretary of State Dean Acheson claimed in 1950 that American paternalism had ended, and that "the Asian

peoples are on their own."<sup>54</sup> Only in attack would "the entire civilized world under the Charter of the United Nations" need to act. This was stating a policy of defense. Indeed, a year earlier, the National Security Council advised "the policies of avoiding military and political support."<sup>55</sup> This advice, however, did not stipulate providing such assistance when nations were under attack, rather when "non-Communist elements […] are willing actively to resist Communism."<sup>56</sup> Thus began a new era of actively seeking to thwart foreign political ideology, not only internally, but also externally, to the reaches of the entire world. Principles of democracy and capitalism became redefined to encompass international goals so as to "contribute to the over-all national interests of the United States."<sup>57</sup>

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century proved to be a new era between political elites and the people they represented. As technology and communication improved, so did the need for political elites to explain, as well as censor, public information in regards to communicating policy in order to obtain public approval. As the United States continued down the path to global hegemony, political elites also found it increasingly necessary to redefine American core values as incorporating global interest. The American people, as well as foreign nations, were often isolated from America's internationalist agenda, but American political elites remained actively and independently engaged internationally so as to discredit any notion that there existed a period of American isolationism.

## NOTES

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