Idea and American foreign policy

The authors who claim that the United States has suffered a legitimation crisis since the beginning of the Roosevelt era often go on to argue that the post-war American anti-communist crusade helped Americans manage this crisis. We believe this is a partial truth and an important one, but it may not be as central to understanding the role that the ideas that are common sense to many Americans have played in governing American foreign policy as it might appear at first glance. The American anti-communist crusade can be explained as the result of the way ideas much older than Leninism have played themselves out in the United States after the country became a world power.

Ideology plays two roles in the foreign policy process. On the one hand, mass ideologies must exist to legitimize the roles played by foreign-policy-makers; ideologies help constitute decision-makers as separate actors. On the other hand the ideologies of foreign-policy-makers themselves let them apprehend the world and ideologies act as guides to policy. The Gramscian perspective suggests two important things in regard to ideology in these roles. First, the ideologies that legitimate decision-makers, the ideas that the mass public of a nation refers to explain why a special elite does and should make policy for them—they likely be coherent within any group in society and they are unlikely to be exactly the same for all groups in society. Foreign-policy-makers will be legitimized by common sense, by the contradictory consciousness of the public. Second, we have no particular reason to believe that the operational ideologies followed by foreign-policy-makers will directly reflect the contradictory consciousness of the mass public more than minimally, that is, at the level needed to maintain the foreign-policy-makers' independent role.

In this chapter we will begin with the ideas that have given popular legitimation to foreign-policy-makers in the United States, in particular the notion of America's special destiny and mission. Then we will turn to the slowly changing mix of operational ideologies which have influenced the practice of American foreign policy from the foundation of the nation. Finally, we will look at foreign policy problems created by the conflicts within and between both sets of ideas, examining the form that any contemporary 'crisis of legitimation' in foreign policy is likely to take.

American destiny and the legitimation of American foreign policy

It is a commonplace of the history Americans teach themselves that American foreign-policy-makers have been a distinguished lot. The United States has been blessed with diplomats like Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Quincy Adams who could charm victory out of military defeat. They worked with authors of bold world visions, men like George Washington, James Monroe, and Woodrow Wilson.

We suspect that part of what makes American foreign-policy-makers look so good to the American public is that the public has put surprisingly few demands on them. In a country where foreign commerce only recently became important to most people, where international wars have not been fought on home territory for generations, the public has little reason to be interested in foreign affairs. Foreign-policy-makers, as compared to officials in other branches of American government, have unusual leeway to define what they want to do and how to do it.

Perhaps the most widespread popular belief about foreign affairs is that the United States has a peculiar destiny. American foreign-policy-makers need to, and have almost always wanted to, treat the US as a country with a special mission.

Yet, Americans have come to no particular agreement as to how that mission should be pursued, although the basic repertoire of political means provided by American religion offers something of a guide. Where and when the United States is powerless to change foreign affairs, foreign-policy-makers can isolate the United States from the rest of the world, or isolate parts of the world from the US. When American policy-makers confront people who can be assumed because of their race, culture, or behavior could be convinced of the superiority of the American system, then policy-makers can work to convert them. When that is impossible and foreign powers threaten the United States value system or the nations that have been converted to its system, then repression must be tried.

Those who accept this Calvinist repertoire have difficulty approving of any attempts their government might make to make long-term deals with any foreign nations that do not accept the 'American system.' That is why it is difficult to find popular support in the United States for certain, non-idealistic visions of international law or for the maintenance of foreign spheres of influence, or, some would argue, for almost all of the traditional forms of diplomatic practice which are all about interacting in good faith with people with whom you disagree. In the real world, they say, American evangelism and attempts at domination have always been frustrated, thus forcing policy-makers into long periods of inactivity demanded by a brooding, isolationist public.

No matter how real these cycles of 'introversion' and 'extroversion' are (and there is debate about that) they do not tell the whole story of the relationship between popular beliefs and foreign policy action. If Calvinist principles by themselves ruled American foreign-policy-making it would be difficult for American diplomats and statesmen to have been as successful as they have been. But really only one of these ideas, the idea of American destiny, has
almost universal support in the United States. Samuel P. Huntington argues quite correctly that the American assumption of special destiny functions as the core of American nationalism? and what an unusual focus of nationalist sentiment it is because the idea of American destiny has no concrete content. Arguably, foreign-policy-makers are constrained by this view to act to maintain and extend ‘Americanism,’ but ‘Americanism’ can mean many things to many different people. Policy-makers have a wide range of choice among different concrete meanings of American destiny.

Huntington, like many American scholars, believes that ‘Americanism’ means only one thing: the liberal principles of individual liberty, property, and preference for the market. But this has not been what all Americans have demanded from their government as expressions of American destiny at all times in the past. At the turn of the century people from the Bible-belt of the midwest and south demanded that the national government support ‘Americanism’ by supporting the Christian missionary movement that had made those the parts of the country where public knowledge and concern about international affairs was the greatest. For whites in the post-reconstruction south, pursuing American destiny might mean pursuing Anglo-Saxon superiority, taking the scepter of white domination of the world from England’s weakened hand. For first or second generation Americans in the Roosevelt era, especially those in industrial working class families, it might mean extending the American system of equal opportunity and the newly won right to organize to all workers throughout the world. For the urban poor at the end of the eighteenth century it might mean supporting the extensions of the Rights of Man, and the revolutionary program of the French Republic, just as today for the many Americans who supported Jimmy Carter, ‘Americanism’ entailed his campaign for human rights.

Popular attitudes about foreign policy place only a very loose constraint on the action of American foreign-policy-makers. Governments need only make a convincing case that they are pursuing the United States’s special destiny by designing a policy that satisfies the different visions of American destiny of a set of American social groups sufficiently powerful to give the government necessary support.

The United States as a minor power

The American foreign-policy-makers who have been so slightly constrained by popular ideologies have been a surprisingly small group of men centered around the American president. When the ‘founder’ of American foreign policy, John Quincy Adams, became Secretary of State under the fifth president in 1817, no more than a dozen men could be considered ‘decision-makers.’ The State Department, the United States’s foreign ministry, had only nine employees in Washington. Eight of them were clerks. And the US had foreign diplomatic establishments in less than a dozen countries. Even when the United States became a great power, after the second world war, the group of foreign policy decision-makers remained small. In 1972 Richard J. Barnet estimated that less than 400 people, only one a woman, had filled the major decision-making positions in the American foreign policy establishment since the war. These decision-makers stand over some twenty-five thousand civilian foreign policy officers in various branches of government, well over one hundred thousand employees in American intelligence services, and a professional military of over two million. The vastness of today’s foreign policy administrative system relative to the small number of administrators creates a host of problems of foreign policy implementation that John Quincy Adams never had to face. Yet, John Quincy Adams would still feel at home among today’s American foreign policy elite. Many of the assumptions, goals, and interpretations of events that he accepted still motivate American foreign policy today.

It would be possible to paint a romanticized picture of the foreign-policy-makers of the early American republic that would have men like John Quincy Adams aghast at the power and pretensions of those who occupy their jobs today. Critics of the United States’s globalism often recall George Washington’s ‘Farewell Address’ which warned future American governments not to become involved in power politics and the entangling alliances of European statecraft and preached a modest, republican isolationism.

But Washington was also the man who called the United States a ‘new empire’ and dreamed of incorporating the entire new world into it and acting as a model for all governments raised after the destruction of Europe’s atavistic monarchies. Washington’s warnings against entangling alliances have more to do with his vision of American uniqueness and destiny than they have to do with any modesty. The United States was a new type of nation, a moral nation, that should not sully itself in Europe’s deceitful bickering.

The founding fathers of American foreign policy shared the popular belief in American destiny. For them, American isolationism was the proper policy only because the United States was yet an embryonic empire, a new order not yet powerful enough to dominate the world. They expected that the American system would expand, as the United States did from the very beginning? As new English-speaking settlers moved west, north, and south across the continent they would set up their own republican governments and then ask for independence (in a commonwealth of republics) or inclusion under the American constitution. These new reflections of the American ideal need not be colonies formed on American territory. They might, like Texas, be parts of neighboring states or foreign empires? Even long-settled places might sue for inclusion in the American system. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, most American policy-makers believed that the English-speaking colonists of Canada would eventually join the United States.
It is worth noting as more than an aside that from the beginning American foreign-policy-makers had little trouble using the traditional diplomatic categories of ‘nation’ and ‘people.’ American policy-makers thought in terms of whole nations, English Canada, choosing to enter the American union, not of individuals, a flood of Canadians asking for citizenship. This may seem surprising given what we have argued is the central role of liberalism in the consciousness of American elites from the beginning. Liberalism, after all, is a philosophy of the individual, not a philosophy of ‘peoples.’ But American exceptionalism, with its deeper roots in religion, already provided American elites with a notion of themselves as a people. In international affairs, liberalism’s focus on the individual was simply displaced to nations. American foreign-policy-makers have always tended to treat international society as no more than the sum of nations. Moreover, nations, treated as individuals writ large, are assumed to have the same goals as liberalism’s human individuals; the pursuit of self-interest, especially in terms of wealth and power. America’s imperial goals were simply those of any nation. Finally, nations could be discovered to be successful or unsuccessful using the same measures that applied to individuals. A hierarchy of nations and people based on wealth and power appeared when the world was viewed through the lenses of early American foreign-policy-makers.

The early American foreign-policy-makers’ vision of a growing and maturing empire even involved an explicit racism that, oddly, had its roots in liberalism as much as any other historical philosophy. Michael H Hunt’s recent comprehensive study, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy,* even considers the white racism of the American elite one of only three principles that have motivated American foreign policy from the beginning. Writing for a contemporary audience that would tend to see white racism as an unfortunate characteristic of lower middle class and working class men and women in declining industrial cities and the rural south, Hunt forcefully demonstrates that in the United States it began as an elite ideology and remained central to the views of foreign-policy-makers until well after the second world war. Racism was not just an elite ideology in the slave south, either; Hunt begins by quoting the racist writings of the most urbane and progressive of the founding fathers from the north, Benjamin Franklin.

The ideological sources of American elite racism were twofold. On the one hand, religious doctrine allowed distinctions to be made between Christian and savage, distinctions that easily translated into categories which no longer reflected professed religion, but to ‘unchanging’ states of being. On the other hand and perhaps more significantly, the liberal Enlightenment idea of progress made it easy to distinguish between ‘backward’ and ‘advanced’ peoples and encouraged the search for explanations of those differences. Ultimately, those explanations would take the form of Social Darwinism, but much earlier, even at the time of the American revolution, the idea of a hierarchy of races was firmly implanted in elite consciousness.

Because American foreign-policy-makers believed in a hierarchy of races, in lesser and greater people, they could justify double standards in diplomacy. The occupation of the American continent by Native Americans imposed no impediment to the development of the continental empire and treaties with such ‘lesser’ people need not be thought to have the same force as treaties with Northern European whites. Similarly, from the very beginning of the American republic at least until the United States became a global power, American foreign policy makers have denied the validity of republican experiments carried on by ‘lesser’ peoples, which explains America’s paradoxical lack of support for most revolutionary and nationalist independence movements. The white republics of Texas or California (or, later, the Boer republics of South Africa) could be expected to actually follow the American example, but not so the republics founded by blacks, like Haiti or Liberia, or Native Americans, like the Cherokee state, or ‘debased,’ ‘mixed’ people like Latin Americans.

The hierarchy of race also assured a hierarchy of diplomatic treatment for these ‘misshapen reflections’ of the American system. The republics of the mixed races could be recognized and treated as slow-learning children, constantly under the protection of the United States. The Native American nations were given the dignity of diplomatic recognition but of an inferior sort, and the moral strictures against the use of force against them were always fewer. Finally, the black republics, governed by the people American foreign-policy-makers placed the lowest on the hierarchy of race, should not even be recognized as second or third class states. The United States recognized neither Haiti, the first republic in the Americas after the United States, nor Liberia, arguably the country that has tried to copy the American system the most faithfully, until generations after their independence.

Some authors who recognize the continuity of the American imperial vision as an extension of the pre-independence idea of American destiny and who recognize the significance of elite racism in American foreign policy still argue that the nineteenth century witnessed a significant falling away from original, more benign ideals embodied in the ‘Farewell Address’ and the later policy of John Quincy Adams. Washington and Adams, along with all the presidents and top decision-makers in between, tended to conceive of extending the American empire by private settlement and a sort of evangelism, the conversion of those who would be converted to the American way. Later, beginning with the war with Mexico in the 1840s and with Spain in 1898, the United States extended its territorial empire across the continent and the Pacific Ocean by force.

The use of force may be a less just means for extending American empire than evangelism, but it is part of the same Puritan complex of ways to deal with the world. When the United States was still an embryonic empire, a weak New Jerusalem in a wicked world, isolation was the sensible policy. As the country became stronger it could more boldly attempt to convert its neighbors and the
world. When those attempts failed, American policy-makers felt it to be not only justified, but benevolent, to impose conversion to the American way by force. As many authors have noted, whenever the United States has used force to gain territory it has done so with self-determination as the justification, forcing the American southwest, Hawaii, Cuba, and the Philippines to convert to the freedom they would have under the American system.

It would be easy to say that this kind of language represents a cynical and self-serving justification for territorial expansions that benefit the class of which American foreign-policy-makers are a part, but it is not quite that simple. Bits of the script of the unfolding of American destiny from isolationist republic to forceful empire have been played out even when only a fraction of the elite could expect immediate economic gain, as for example, during the war with Mexico when southern cotton growers stood to gain vast new territories suitable for their crop which had destroyed the fertility of the soil in the old south.

Scholars who claim economic interests are always more important than ideology suggest another way in which the ideas guiding American foreign policy appear to have changed during the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the century the American empire grew by annexing neighboring territory where European and American settlements had sprung up in areas under Native American or Mexican sovereignty. By the end of the century the United States was annexing territory, but it was often far afield from American settlements. The new American empire in the Pacific served more as bases for an American navy dedicated to the 'open door' policy of giving the American merchants equal or better access than the European powers had to the vast markets in China and Japan. This 'open door imperialism' became the model for American expansion in the twentieth century when the United States has not been concerned with acquiring territory or settling Americans abroad to create new states, but has been concerned with establishing a military presence in a vast territory outside the United States and has been concerned with creating and monitoring international agreements that liberalize international trade and favor American business.

This change, too, was anticipated at the founding of the Republic. The first American Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, the man who 'phrased' Washington's 'Farewell,' called the new nation a growing 'commercial empire.' The United States always had an interest in most-favored nation trade relations with other nations and the United States has always been willing to use military force against weaker nations, even those very far away, to protect American business interests. The hymn of the American Marines (the force maintained, in part, for this precise purpose) celebrates early twentieth century battles in Mexico, 'From the halls of Montezuma, and then goes on to invoke earlier, nineteenth century, battles much further afield, in North Africa, 'to the shores of Tripoli'.

The long-standing 'open door' or liberal trade policy, which the United States has supported with its military might ever since the founding of the republic, reflects the content given to 'American destiny' by American foreign-policy-makers: America's destiny is to extend the liberal economic creed to the entire world. It should hardly be surprising that this view of American destiny rather than, say, the view that would see the United States as extending Protestant Christianity or democratic government to the entire world would be one that would predominate among American foreign-policy-makers. As Hunt argues, American foreign policy decision-makers have always been drawn from a narrow elite base, from (say) the most privileged one percent of the American population, the strata where the full liberal economic creed predominates. Barnett notes that even after the second world war, after the United States became a global power, foreign policy decision-makers were still predominantly men from big business or corporate legal backgrounds who attended the same schools and worked in the financial districts familiar to John Quincy Adams and the founders of American foreign policy.

Thus, from 1776 to 1945 American foreign policy can be thought of as playing out a single script, 'The Rise of the Liberal Empire,' written by the colonial elite that founded the American foreign policy system. The script defined America as the white, Anglo-Saxon, republican commercial empire that the founders created, but it relied as much on older, Calvinist notions of how men should relate to each other as it did upon the liberal ideas of exchange and contract that could be found in Adam Smith. The script could be played out for so long because it was so successful. The American empire did expand in just the way that Hamilton, or Washington, or John Quincy Adams imagined it would. As the young republic grew stronger it extended itself across the continent and then the Pacific and even acted as the paternal guardian of republican experiments of 'lesser' people who tried to follow the American example, from the Latin Americans in the beginning of the nineteenth century to the Chinese at the beginning of the twentieth.

Still, its success may not have been the only reason that the American foreign policy script changed so little in the United States's first century and a half. It also had few challengers. The intellectuals consulted by American foreign-policy-makers developed no understanding of the American role in the world. In fact, the intellectual support that American foreign-policy-makers had before the second world war was surprisingly narrow and parochial. American foreign-policy-makers leaned how to deal with the world from their business experience, from the prior history of American diplomacy, and from the lessons of the ancient world, not from the study of foreign nations and cultures. Most of the elite American universities, the breeding ground of American foreign-policy-makers, did little to inform their students about the modern world, the languages, cultures, and diplomatic practices of other nations. What instruction they did give was most likely to be about Europe, and especially
England, and least likely to be about the places where the American empire was expanding, Latin America and East Asia.

As Hunt argues, racism and the Social Darwinism that later supported it provided an easy way for foreign-policy-makers and the class that spawned them to reduce the mass of information about the rest of the world that they might otherwise have to consider. There were, of course, American schools of higher learning where a great deal of information about these parts of the world were taught, the schools that generated the bulk of the American middle class missionary movement, but only one of these, Yale, was one of the elite schools that foreign-policy-makers might be expected to attend. The continuity of the ideas underlying American foreign policy was reinforced by the fact that American diplomatic history remained the major relevant source of knowledge that American foreign-policy-makers had about how to deal with the world. Certainly the teaching of American diplomatic history changed from decade to decade. For example, after the defeat of the Confederacy in the civil war historians came to see the earlier war with Mexico as more of an unfortunate "un-American" imperialist incident than earlier historians had reckoned it. But the unfolding of American destiny remained the dominant theme of American diplomatic history until well into the twentieth century.

The United States as a great power

The script of American foreign policy only began to be rewritten when the players prepared for the penultimate act in which the once downtrodden and despised nation becomes one of the two great powers struggling for dominance on the world stage. Sacred ideas of American destiny remained, as did the equation of the United States with the liberal economic principles long-favored by American business, but something new was added to the old Calvinist repertoire of ways to achieve change in the world: Science, technology, and systematic management began to influence American foreign policy.

The philosophy of systematic management, of the application of science and technology to human problems, "Fordism," entered American international policy directly from its source in American society, the gigantic automobile industry. Responsible for the second industrial revolution at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Under the sway of Social Darwinism, the leaders of large American firms at the end of the last century developed the conviction that the American economy needed to expand outward, to extend American enterprise abroad not just by selling goods in all markets but by building factories, loaning capital, and struggling to dominate wider and wider economic spheres. Initially this more aggressive private interest behind the open door had little implication for the foreign policy of government, but after businessmen schooled in the new scientific philosophies of management entered government and as the idea of a scientifically-organized state promoting business took hold, American foreign policy took on a new role as a promoter of US business interests abroad. Of course, this new role was justified with altruistic rhetoric, but not with the old religious view of America's manifest destiny; instead America was destined to rule the world because of the advanced position of its science, and science should guide America's further expansion.

The success of the business-government partnership, the technologies created by it, and the seemingly limitless possibilities of extending that system were all central to Henry Luce's famous declaration of "the American Century" at the war's end. The United States would become:

... the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprises, America as the training center of the skillful servants of mankind, America as the Good Samaritan ... and America as the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice.

As Stephen Ambrose argues, American technological leadership gave American policy-makers the confidence to seek a global role, to become the policeman of the world as well as the world's technological savior. In this context the American nuclear monopoly at the end of the war was 'a godsend,' promising to enable the United States to impose its will like it never had before."

One consequence of the addition of faith in science and technology to the underpinnings of American foreign policy was the legitimation it gave to United States's growing national security establishment, a world-wide peace-time army, air force, and navy with immediate access to a larger world than that available to any previous imperial army. But perhaps a just as significant, and often overlooked, way in which faith in science entered American post-war foreign policy was in the scientific faith that American policy-makers developed in the dictates of classical diplomatic theory, Realpolitik, newly discovered in the United States after the war. For more than a generation, American policy-makers and the intellectuals that support them have treated certain incidental historical lessons as scientific truths about international relations. Most significantly, the 'lesson of Munich' can be variously read as saying one can never cooperate with totalitarian states or that the use of force is the only effective way of dealing with great power conflicts.

As Hunt argues, one of the major purposes of the policy-makers' attempt to create a 'science' of foreign affairs for the United States after the second world war was to preclude extensive public involvement in the professional matter of managing the new, extensive American empire. Intellectuals and policy-makers considered the public too moralistic and fickle to be involved in dangerous matters of state. As Barnet points out, for the new American national security managers of the post-war era American public opinion became another variable in their equations, something else to be scientifically managed. Significantly, this professional distrust of public involvement in the important business of foreign-policy-making was a view widely shared across the apparent
ideological divides that split the American ruling classes after the second world war. George Kennan, who could be called the premier intellectual of American foreign policy directly after the war saw public involvement as one of the greatest problems policy-makers had to face, but so did his sharpest and most respected contemporary critic, Walter Lippmann.39

Paradoxically, if rigid thinking and moralism were to be the criteria used for excluding people from involvement in managing the American empire, many of America’s so-called ‘realist’ decision-makers would have had to have found other jobs. Scientific realism, like all of the other ideological strata that influence American foreign policy, was laid down in the policy-makers’ minds on top of layer upon layer of other, often contradictory, historical philosophies. Therefore one the most celebrated of the realist thinkers, Reinhold Niebuhr, could write a messianic book on American destiny, saying that the United States was the new Athens and the new Rome, the holder of civilization against the barbarians, at the same time that he advocated what he considered a measured lack of idealism in foreign relations.36 Some critics argue that America’s national security managers have inappropriately applied a faith in science to a realm where most problems cannot be solved, leaving American policy-makers with an unwarranted sense of omnipotence?7

Perhaps the most prominent sign of the lack of realism of America’s post-war ‘realists’ is the persistence of the American crusade against communism, and the communism of the Soviet Union in particular. The most widely-used text on American post-war foreign policy even organizes its argument around anti-communism and anti-Sovietism as two of the three constant goals pursued by the United States.40 The other one, not surprisingly, is liberal internationalism, a relative constant in American foreign policy since Hamilton first thought about America’s expanding commercial empire.

Where does American anti-communism come from and how did it become so strong? One logical answer might be that it has its source in interests of the same class that gave the United States its older, liberal foreign policy goals. Private businessmen have good reason to be rabid in their opposition to communism.

But that answer is not complete. Writing in 1950, in the first major empirical study of public opinion and American foreign policy, Gabriel Almond claimed Every group of any size in the US sees Soviet communists as a threat, the believing Christian, trade unionist, democratic Socialist, liberal, conservative.49

Arguably, Almond could have been reflecting a peculiar time when anti-communist zealots like Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon were whipping up anti-Soviet hysteria. But other evidence from different times points in the same direction Robert Dallek argues that in 1939, the majority of Americans, like the majority of Germans, preferred fascism to communism.40 The preference for the allies in the European war which eventually led to American involvement at first came more from identity with the British than from opposition to systems imposed by the Axis.

Of course, popular opinion about communism need not matter very much as long as American foreign policy had other legitimations. Many realists argue that American foreign-policy-makers would have to be anti-Soviet because the Soviet Union was the only major challenger to the United States left after the war and that the fact that the Soviet Union was communist and the United States was not was reason enough to be anti-communist. President Truman’s personal speeches and writings, for example, did not become strongly anti-Soviet and anti-communist until he developed the conviction that the United States would have to replace British power throughout much of the world.41 Yet, anti-communism has always been more than just a tactical necessity of Realpolitik for many American decision-makers. For those with strong religious convictions it fit on top of and helped define the moral mission that the United States was expected to undertake. For instance J. Edgar Hoover, the leader of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for most of its existence and the one bureaucrat that no American president dared to fire, deeply believed that God had chosen the United States as his special instrument to overcome world communism.42 With anti-communism already in place as a religious value of some American leaders, it has always been tempting for American national security managers to play upon popular religious and quasi-religious sentiments to ‘sell’ what otherwise might be unpopular imperial policies as part of an anti-communist crusade. Without the communists menace a whole host of innovative American post-war policies from the Marshall Plan to military assistance given to repressive regimes throughout the Third World might never have surmounted the hurdles of public opinion even though those hurdles are very low.43

Even with all of these innovations in American foreign policy, the new importance of the faith in science, ‘realism,’ and anti-communism, it is important to emphasize how much did not change when the United States finally became a great power. Most significantly, American foreign-policy-makers continued to define the core of the American national interest as an interest in ‘open doors,’ equal or better access for Americans to foreign markets and sources of supply, and to define the American dream that they were extending to the world in terms of the entire range of nineteenth-century liberal economic principles including the sanctity of private property and the special usefulness of markets.44

But it is equally important, and less often emphasized, that American foreign policy continued to be motivated by the invidious comparisons that American elites make about groups of people. Looked at from one perspective, elite white racism in the United States changed its form, not its substance, in the years since the US became a world power. For example, when the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization was created at the end of the
The troubled superpower

We concluded chapter 2 by mentioning how the growth of institutions of control, both firms and government, may have undermined both key liberal beliefs (the efficacy of individual action) and key religious beliefs (the sufficiency of the isolationist, evangelist, crusader repertoire) that have been important constants in American political life for generations. The ideological problems for American foreign-policy-making in the same period have taken quite a different form due to the historical dominance of foreign-policy-making by the American elite. On the one hand, there is a problem of elite ideology: at the moment that the United States achieved the historical, essential liberal goals that had formed the basic core of American foreign policy motivations since the founding of the Republic, those liberal beliefs were being challenged by members of the very class that had been served by US foreign policy from the beginning. On the other hand lies a problem of mass legitimation: the foreign policy of America as a great power has demanded more public sacrifice and, hence, greater attention to some of the most archaic themes of American common sense, than ever before.

The problem for the elite can be understood as one of whether some version of foreign policy 'scientism,' Mona Harrington's 'functionalist' version of the American dream, or the traditional script of America's expanding commercial empire will guide foreign policy. In the two major recent empirical studies of American elite attitudes toward foreign policy, this conflict appears as the difference between 'conservatives' who are anti-communist, who believe that America's great power status requires the US to crusade against alternative ideological systems, and who have great faith in unmanaged international economic liberalism, and 'liberals' who have become 'non-interventionist' due to the failure of the Vietnam war, who evaluate relations with communist regimes in functional terms, and who support the development of a 'managed' international liberal economy through growing international organizations. Jimmy Carter, with his emphases on restricting the use of US force, supporting international attempts to coordinate economic policy (at least among rich capitalist states), and looking for ways for the US to 'get past' its virulent anti-communism, epitomized the later group. Ronald Reagan exemplifies the former.

But knowledge of just these elite differences would hardly be enough to let anyone predict how American foreign policy will develop in the future. The foreign-policy-makers of America the great power have made unprecedented demands on the American public since 1941, taxing them to pay for a 'peacetime' military as well as massive wars, demanding further funds to reconstruct allies and maintain friendly governments, and requiring young men to offer their lives in wars that, in historical terms, were the most massive and frequent in American history. After all, a key element in even the elite foreign policy debate in the US since 1970 was a response to the failure of the policy of conscription in Vietnam, a failure that led many American intellectuals to re-evaluate the efficiency of US foreign policy, if not its morality. As long as the United States has been a great power, the American public, not just the elite, has been able to make some effective demands on American foreign-policy-makers and American foreign policy has had to respond, more, to the interests and aspirations of what Gramsci would call the popular masses.

In the absence of a political process to illuminate 'good sense,' popular demands on the foreign policy of the United States as a great power emphasize all the contradictory aspects of American common sense, including the residues of religion that are less apparent in elite ideology. To many members of the American working class the lesson of the American failure in Vietnam is that the US should be less involved with the world; it should practice the isolationism of a chosen people unable to influence it preterite neighbors. To other non-elite Americans the lesson is that the obviously powerful United States should be willing to use its power and defeat its enemies not back away from conflict as it did in Vietnam.

Neither of these, albeit simplified, extremes of mass opinion in the United States provides much support, much legitimation for the type of foreign policy preferred by what many scholars consider the most progressive portion of the American elite the 'post-cold war internationalists' or the businessmen who support a non-interventionist United States. The kind of foreign policy that unreflective American common sense is unlikely to support is precisely the sort of policy that Jimmy Carter followed in his first years in office. Conversely, probably the type of American foreign policy upon which it would be easiest to get some level of agreement between an unreflective elite and unreflective mass public would be the conservative policy that Reagan followed, a continued enactment of the traditional American foreign-policy script, that gave the American mass public a desired role: part of a successful global crusade.