

What Is America's Role in the World?

By *Marion Smith* (</about/staff/s/marion-smith>)



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The success of the American experiment in self-government is a result of its founding principles, set forth in the Declaration of Independence and secured by the United States Constitution. The universal and permanent truths of human equality and liberty are preserved in America by the rule of law, and are reflected in its institutions and cherished by its people. Does America's dedication to these exceptional principles give it a special role to play in the world?

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From the beginning, the purpose of the United States' foreign policy has been to defend the American constitutional system and the common interests of the American people. The U.S. has thus been committed to providing for its common defense, protecting the freedom of its commerce, and seeking peaceful relations with other nations. The most important goal of American foreign policy continues to be defending the independence of the United States, so that America can govern itself according to its principles and pursue its national interests.

At the same time, the Founders were keenly aware of the universal significance of America's principles, and of America's unique responsibility for upholding and advancing these principles. As Thomas Paine reminded patriots everywhere during the trying times of America's struggle for independence, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."^[1] The Founders believed that the idea of human liberty and, therefore, the inherent right of self-government, were applicable not only to Americans, but to all people everywhere.

The Declaration of Independence states that all mankind is endowed with the same unalienable rights, and that to secure those rights "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The American Founders spoke of universal truths and created a powerful model of liberty for the whole world. They understood that America's commitment to its principles—in both domestic and foreign policy—has profound consequences for the cause of liberty everywhere.

As George Washington observed, "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered as *deeply*, perhaps as *finally*, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."^[2]

The American experiment was important partly because it was an example to oppressed people around the world. After touring the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1835 that the “principal instrument” of American foreign policy is “freedom.”^[3] He meant that, in the United States, diplomacy is not just something the government does. When American citizens proclaim their faith in their principles and live them at home, they are helping to make their nation's foreign policy, because their words and actions are a lesson for the world.

If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off...when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.

— George Washington
September 19, 1796

During the Greek Revolution of 1821 against the Ottoman Empire, U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster asked, “What is the soul, the informing spirit of our own institutions, of our entire system of government?” His answer: “Public opinion. While this acts with intensity and moves in the right direction the country must ever be safe—let us direct the force, the vast moral force, of this engine to the aid of others.”^[4] Even when the U.S. government does not intervene officially, the support of the American people for those who seek liberty is a valuable aid to their cause.

Throughout our history, American citizens have been inspired by our political, religious, and economic freedoms to act as ambassadors of liberty. As missionaries, merchants, and medics our citizen-diplomats have established schools, orphanages, and hospitals. They have translated literature, educated children, and inspired political reform in countries around the world that were oppressed and impoverished. The “greatest enemy of tyranny,” as Webster said, is this republican spirit of self-government. The civic engagement of individual American citizens and their commitment to America's founding principles are a vital part of the United States' unique role in the world.

Yet as one nation in a world of nations, the United States has also had to practice diplomacy towards other governments. The Founders understood that America's principles must be reflected in its relations with other nations. For them, diplomacy was not merely a means of negotiating America's interests. It was also a tool for advancing liberty. Liberty has always been the defining principle of America—it is not merely a political preference. The United States thus sent some of its brightest minds and most ardent patriots—Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams—abroad as diplomats to represent the American people and the exceptional ideas of the young republic.

America has a unique understanding of statecraft, because the United States' foreign policy has always been accountable to the American people through their elected representatives. The monarchies and empires of Europe did not recognize the "unalienable rights" of human liberty. Their diplomacy served the interests of their rulers, and did not reflect the consent of the governed.

The Founders believed that America's role in the world would be limited by constitutional government. It would also be inspired by a sense of justice. That was why George Washington recommended a foreign policy of independence and strength, a policy that would allow America to "choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel."

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

— — John F. Kennedy

January 20, 1961



In this dangerous world, the United States was not founded to be a solitary fortress or to remain isolated from world affairs. When Washington noted America's "detached and distant position," he was acknowledging a geographical reality, not defining a foreign policy principle. America's early foreign policies were not inherently isolationist or non-interventionist; they were prudent actions shaped by the need to preserve America's republican self-government.

Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793 enabled the young nation to avoid the war raging between France and England. The U.S. was militarily weak and fighting a war would have endangered the very existence of the American experiment. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 protected America's interests while presenting to the world the principles of self-government and political liberty. The Doctrine was not isolationist: it sought to defend the independence of the young republics of Latin America that had just thrown off Spanish rule.

"The flames kindled on the 4th of July 1776, have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism," Thomas Jefferson remarked upon observing the independence of these new republics. "[O]n the contrary, they will consume these engines and all

century spoke up for those around the world who were attempting to gain their political liberty and establish a government based on the consent of the people.

For example, the American government provided moral support to the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, which sought to found a state based on the principle of self-government. After the Austrian and Russian Empires crushed Hungarian independence, the United States sought to protect Hungarian refugees. The United States did not declare war, but it did use diplomacy to stand for freedom.

America is a defender of liberty at home. Abroad, the U.S. maintains its independence and prudently pursues its interests, while standing for the idea of political freedom across the globe. The American people are not *required* to risk their blood and treasure in defense of the liberty of others. But the United States cannot have a foreign policy that fails to reflect the political truths that define it. America stands for the principles of liberty, independence, and self-government, and its interests are defined and shaped by those principles.

America *does* have a special role in the world—one that is morally and philosophically grounded in the principles of human liberty, and in its sense of justice. This means that the true consistency of American foreign policy is to be found not in its policies, which prudently change and adapt, but in its guiding principles, which are unchanging and permanent.



America's perpetual purpose in the world was exemplified and best articulated by America's

America's "glory is not dominion, but liberty. Her march is the march of the mind." [6]

While America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," Adams continued, we must remember that the United States holds both "a spear and a shield." The motto etched upon America's shield is "Freedom, Independence, Peace." It is this motto, Adams concludes, that "has been her declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice." [7]

America's independence and its commitment to civil and religious freedom has made the United States a prosperous nation, and that prosperity has made it strong. America's principles have also made it a just nation. In order to safeguard these blessings of liberty, the United States will maintain its national independence, but it will not shy away from identifying and, if necessary, fighting the monsters of despotism in order to protect its interests, defend freedom, and preserve peace.

From Bunker Hill to the Berlin Wall, the American love of liberty has inspired a commitment to see the cause of liberty triumph abroad. As long as America is guided by its principles, the United States will not only continue to enjoy the blessings of liberty at home, but will also maintain its stand for freedom in the world.



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- **George Washington's Farewell Address (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp)**

In his final message to his fellow citizens, George Washington urged all Americans to remember the value of the Union, to respect and uphold the Constitution, to resist the spirit of party, to value religion, and to practice enlightened and independent patriotism in their policy towards foreign nations.

- **Matthew Spalding, "America's Founders and the Principles of Foreign Policy: Sovereign Independence, National Interests, and the Cause of Liberty in the World (<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/10/Americas-Founders-and-the-Principles-of-Foreign-Policy-Sovereign-Independence>)"**

Matthew Spalding explains what America's founding principles mean for understanding America's place in the world today. In order to protect its constitutional system of government and pursue its national interests, the United States must continue to maintain its independence in world affairs.

- **Marion Smith, "The Myth of Isolationism (Part I): American Leadership and the Cause of Liberty ([/research/reports/2010/12/the-myth-of-isolationism-part-1-american-leadership-and-the-cause-of-liberty](http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/12/the-myth-of-isolationism-part-1-american-leadership-and-the-cause-of-liberty))"**

Were the Founders isolationists? Marion Smith sheds light on one of the most common myths about early U.S. foreign policy. The words and examples of the Founders make it clear that America was never intended to be isolated from the world. Indeed, America was to be a defender of freedom in the world.

Current Issues

- **LEADERSHIP.** Kim R. Holmes, *Liberty's Best Hope* (<http://astore.amazon.com/heritagefoundationbookstore-20/detail/0891952780>), The Heritage Foundation, 2008. Since the early days of the American Republic, the United States has been a beacon of liberty in the world. Kim Holmes argues that America must continue this tradition of leadership in the 21st century.
- **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY.** Carnes Lord and Helle C. Dale, "[Public Diplomacy and the Cold War: Lessons Learned](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2007/09/Public-Diplomacy-and-the-Cold-War-Lessons-Learned) (<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2007/09/Public-Diplomacy-and-the-Cold-War-Lessons-Learned>)," September 18, 2007. During the Cold War, the principles of human liberty were confronted by the ideology of Communism. In this struggle of ideas, the United States played an indispensable role in standing *for* liberty, not merely against the threat of tyranny.
- **INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS.** Kim R. Holmes, "[Smart Multilateralism: When and When Not to Rely on the United Nations](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/09/Smart-Multilateralism-When-and-When-Not-to-Rely-on-the-United-Nations) (<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/09/Smart-Multilateralism-When-and-When-Not-to-Rely-on-the-United-Nations>)," September 21, 2010.

Kim Holmes argues that, if the United States is to advance its many interests in the world, it needs to pursue multilateral diplomacy in a smarter, more pragmatic manner. The U.S. should

What Is America's Role in the World? Act multilaterally, only when it would be in America's interests, and when it will serve to advance liberty.

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