

From the earliest days of the Republic, the outlines of an evolving American grand strategy have been evident in our foreign and domestic policy.¹ Much of that history continues to inform our strategic conduct, and therefore American grand strategy rests today on traditional foundations. Despite a welter of theory and debate, grand strategy as a practical matter is remarkably consistent from decade to decade, with its means altering as technology advances and institutions evolve but its ends and ways showing marked continuity.

Grand strategy can be understood simply as *the use of power to secure the state*.² Thus, it exists at a level above particular strategies intended to secure particular ends and above the use of military power alone to achieve political objectives. One way to comprehend grand strategy is to look for long-term state behavior as defined by enduring, core security interests and how the state secures and advances them over time. In a way, this means that what the state *does* matters more than what the state *says*. Grand strategy is therefore related to, but not synonymous with, National Security Strategies, National Military Strategies, Quadrennial Defense Reviews, or Defense Strategic Guidance. Grand strategy transcends the security pronouncements of political parties or individual administrations. Viewed in this light, American grand strategy shows great persistence over time, orienting on those things deemed most important—those interests for which virtually any administration will spend, legislate, threaten, or fight to defend.

The Roots of American Grand Strategy

American grand strategy cannot be understood without a historical grounding. Prior to the Revolution, the defense of the colonies as a whole was left to the British crown, and the colonial militia handled local defense. Contention between the great powers (Spain, the Netherlands, France, and Great Britain) on the North American continent bred an enduring distaste among the colonists for international intervention in the Western hemisphere. Prerevolutionary warfare was endemic and nearly constant in North America, fostering on the one hand a familiarity with conflict, but on the other a distrust of standing forces that would condition American strategic thought for several centuries.³

As the United States became more firmly established, this impulse found expression in the Monroe Doctrine and in a general aversion to involvement in European wars that dated from President George Washington's first administration.⁴ This aversion stemmed in part from military and economic weakness, but the desire not to become enmeshed in the politics of a great power rivalry also played a key role. America was fortunate not to be drawn more deeply than it was into the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, and thereafter the desire to pursue continental expansion and to exclude further European colonization of the hemisphere shaped our policy and strategy for the rest of the 19th century.⁵

From the start, American grand strategy also carried a defining ideological component. While generally pragmatic, early American political and military leaders were strongly influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment and the Revolution and by an emerging American political consciousness.⁶ Since the Revolutionary era, most American conflicts have been articulated and justified with some reference to this founding ideology, lending a distinctive, normative dimension to American strategy and strategic culture. Sometimes described as "American exceptionalism," this component has been seen by some as an impulse to promote democratic values and the rule of law abroad as well as at home, and by others as an excuse for intervention.⁷

Although our historical narrative emphasizes reliance on local militia forces, regular forces or volunteer units raised outside the militia organizational structure have formed the center of gravity of America's military establishment as far back as the Revolutionary War.⁸ For all significant campaigns at least through the Korean conflict, the pattern or cycle of America at war featured small regular forces, an expansion of the Army during the conflict through a combination of militia call-ups, volunteering, and conscription, and then a drawdown or return to prewar levels. This original aversion to large standing forces was undoubtedly rooted in the English Civil War; many of the original colonists came to the New World to escape the repression and incessant conflict of the Old World, and those memories became firmly imprinted in their cultural DNA.

Throughout the 19th century, the United States grew and evolved as a rising regional power, only achieving great power status at the beginning of the 20th century. The collapse of the Spanish empire in South America and the 1867 emergence of

Canada as an independent commonwealth nation accelerated an effective end to European presence in the Western Hemisphere that was rendered final with the ejection of Spain from Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898.⁹ Territorial expansion through the Louisiana Purchase, Mexican-American War, Alaska Purchase, and Indian Wars completed the process of continental growth, accompanied by large-scale immigration from Europe, the transcontinental railroad, a growing and powerful mercantile capacity, and industrialization on a broad scale—thus setting conditions for America’s evolution into a superpower in the following century.

Overshadowing everything else in the 19th century is the American Civil War. Vast in scope and scale, the Civil War fundamentally challenged the survival of the Nation and its constitutional system. More Americans died in the Civil War than in all other U.S. wars. Over the course of the conflict, large land and naval forces were raised, conscription was invoked, and modern technologies like mass production, military railroads, the telegraph, breech-loading, rifled artillery, repeating rifles, and iron-clad warships were introduced. Modern military professionalism and generalship replaced the notion of the talented amateur. Profound political questions were settled, most importantly the central role and importance of the Federal Government and the President as chief executive and commander in chief. There would be no going back.

Though the military establishment returned to prewar levels following the Civil War, the precedent of mass mobilization under an organized War and Navy Department and professional generals and admirals had been well established. Professional military education took root, notably at the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island, and at the Army’s School of Application for Infantry and Cavalry (later the Command and General Staff College) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.¹⁰ Up through the Spanish-American War, the Army performed essentially constabulary duties, while the Navy steadily evolved toward a modern, capable, technically proficient arm of the service with a coherent doctrine.

By the end of the 19th century, the general tenets of American grand strategy were well established and consistently applied by Presidents and congressional leaders of both parties. The overriding principle was, and remains, the protection of American territory, citizens, our constitutional system of government, and our

economic well-being. These “vital interests” were secured and enabled in the 1800s through protection of trade and freedom of navigation on the oceans; a prohibition against European military intervention in the Western hemisphere; a capable navy; a small but professional army, capable of rapid expansion in time of crisis; and a readiness to provide support to civil authorities when needed. Protected by two vast oceans, with an industrialized and increasingly global economy and a large and growing population (enabling the raising of a potentially huge land force if threatened), the United States generally enjoyed a stable security environment.

A Century Like No Other

The new century would transform American grand strategy in different but comparable ways. By a wide margin, the 20th century would prove to be the most catastrophic in history. The Spanish-American War, while revealing many shortcomings in organization and supply for the land forces, showcased a powerful and competent Navy with global reach and made the United States an imperial power with newly won possessions in the Caribbean (Puerto Rico) and the Pacific (the Philippines and Guam). America had now moved decisively onto the world stage.

In the second decade of the century, it became clear that war loomed in Europe, as armies assumed massive proportions, professional general staffs perfected the machinery of mobilization, and industrialization and advancing technology equipped armies and navies for large-scale, protracted war. The United States, preoccupied with colonial concerns in the Philippines and protected by an impressive fleet and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, genuinely pursued a neutrality that would eventually founder on two key strategic dilemmas: the protection of trade and markets, and the potential rise of a hostile power in control of the European landmass. American pride was certainly touched by unrestricted submarine warfare, but what could not be borne was the isolation of U.S. commerce from European markets or the prospect of German control of all of Europe’s economic and demographic resources. If that occurred, Germany could conceivably threaten the continental United States both militarily and by setting the terms of trade. While cultural and ideological affinities with European democracies played important roles and a politically powerful isolationist movement offered