

Midterm Paper by Vera Petkantchin

When reading literature on American foreign policy written by American authors, an unencumbered by national prejudice foreign observer gets the impression that there has never been a large national plan to account for the transformation of Washington's admonition against "entangling alliances" to the Monroe doctrine of "Europe for the Europeans, America – for USA" and, subsequently, the intervention in the two world wars. One has the feeling that US ascent into the most powerful and influential state in the world has happened by chance and as the result of mere coincidences – by participation into wars it had no wish to fight, but somehow was dragged into. It is almost unfathomable that during the age of the flourishing European balance of power, when states would devote all their time to devising elaborate explanations to justify their imperialistic interventions all over the world, across the Ocean there was a vast state, newly created and full of vitality and pioneering spirit, whose gradual expansion first on its continent and then on other important points of the world wasn't a carefully and deliberately forethought national strategy, transmitted from president to president, from generation to generation. It seems that the most sustained argumentation these authors can give is based on the existence of a Blind Inexorable Fate whose long arm forced the state of America to go on a quest for peace and democracy anywhere it deemed necessary to enforce it by military warfare.

If the same foreign observer, however, does not take into account the differences between the deepest foundations of the American and European collective psychology, he

might not be able to fully grasp the peculiarities of American foreign policy and the strange, sometimes insincere-looking intermingling of lofty speech about ideals and the reality of their implementation, which often appears as stark imperialism.

This paper will try to defend the following viewpoints with respect to the proposed questions: a more proper name for isolationism, as Rostow defines it, would be expansionism or imperialism, but it still remains an appropriate strategy for the United States to follow in its formative period; isolationism (in the common definition of the word) was no longer a proper strategy for the United States in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and this necessitated American participation into the First World War; Theodore Roosevelt's basis for intervention was more appropriate in the given circumstances and largely the inability of the United States to enforce the Treaty of Versailles after the war was caused by the dismissal of his basis in favor of Woodrow Wilson's; there can be no ultimate opinion on whether the Versailles Treaty was too lenient or too harsh, and who was responsible for that, but for certain all efforts should have been made to enforce it as it was; absolute moral standards cannot be applied to international politics, because 'absolute moral standards' is a devoid of substance category; foreign policy should incorporate a reasonable and careful use of moral ideas filtered through a country's geostrategic interests – an approach Harry Truman wisely applied; Truman's significant mistake was dropping the atomic bombs on Japan.

From its very creation the United States started off with an advantage that no other country had enjoyed before. It benefited from the insoluble controversies between the two leading empires of the time and pillars of the system of balance of power – Britain and France, and by a mixture of ingenious diplomacy and clever use of military tactics, despite the prevailing numbers of the opposition army, was able to achieve success in a seemingly unwinnable war. Through the distance of time, it may be easy to attribute the relatively uneventful establishment of the American state to the fact that Britain and France could have never at the time appreciated the treasure they were holding in their hands. The result was that neither of them cared too much as to put primary emphasis on preserving a decisive influence in America – Britain simply lost the war (and although

didn't acknowledge the colonies a "causa perdata" until after the British-American war of 1812, seemed to be relieved by the removal of this burden from its shoulders) and France, which had contributed to the American win, could have certainly made more efforts to shape the new state in such a way that would steer American future development in French favor. Truly, at the time France was already preoccupied with the impending Great Revolution. Even so, the United States made use of the very first case in which France needed help in the same revolution to state its neutrality and stay clean of any appetites France might have had to get a firm hold over it.

There were geographical, cultural and political factors contributing to the mere historical facts that made the creation of the American state so unusually propitious. Inhabiting only a minute portion of a vast scarcely populated continent that was begging to be taken (and sooner or later that would happen), the American people was destined never to experience the restraints of a small overpopulated continent like Europe which left the numerous ethnicities, whose national self-determination was just emerging at the time, with no other choice but to constantly fight for their physical survival in a political climate poisoned by actions whose Machiavellian justification turned out inevitable in the given situation. Americans were born and lived their lives in a surrounding that fostered their freedom-loving spirit in every possible way – all the space they were the sole masters of made their frame of mind tangibly different from that of any other nationality in the Old World and accounted for their readiness to accept the ideals European visionaries were shaping for their peoples much earlier than these peoples themselves. In this way the whole climate of the Enlightenment, all the momentous achievements in the development of political theory found an excellent soil to grow on in the new continent – America was the first republic, implementing in practice and without the bloody entanglements in France the principles Montesquieu had laid out in theory. Last but not least, the intransigent New-Englanders enjoyed the leadership of a group of extraordinary statesmen in the initial, most crucial years for the survival of the state, who were able to learn wisely from the mistakes of Europe, conduct a determined diplomacy even from the position of a small state and instill in their constituency the values that would remain a trade mark of American society ever after.

In such a setting was the United States born. The immediate question presented before the first few generations of policy-makers concerned the course the country should follow in its relations to other countries and more specifically – Europe. This course has come to be known in analytic literature as “isolationism” and its postulates laid out in Washington’s farewell address have been rendered so trite by constant usage, that nobody anymore dares even to question the appropriateness of the definition, or whether there has ever been such a thing as isolationism in American foreign policy.

If isolationism is narrowly and conveniently defined as staying out of the Eastern hemisphere, yes – the United States was isolationist even until 1917. To me American foreign policy was expansionist from its very inception and this was its only possible nature. What makes it seem even more so is the fact that almost every undertaking in the formative period was successful. USA wasn’t abstaining from the European balance of power – in fact she participated in it in a very subtle and effective way. Of course, the initial stages of its expansion, viewed through the prism of contemporary national security guidelines and the principle of choosing appropriate means for your goals, may lead one to believe that America was sticking to the sacred advice of its first president and was following an isolationist course. The most important international events in the decades after the independence (not only the settlement of new territories in the West, populated by Indian tribes, but the appetites for acquiring new territories already owned by sovereign countries, such as Louisiana, Florida, the plans for invading Canada, later on Cuba, and the aid for the liberation of Latin American peoples from colonial rule only to be followed by the imposition of American economic influence) indicate an active involvement in the state of international affairs. This involvement, quite naturally, was carefully steered by the American leaders and was always commensurate to the Union’s power at the time. It was characterized by two almost mutually exclusive principles – the deliberately cautious approach toward the European balance of power, where foreign policy was guided by the effort to use wisely any opportunity for gaining a better international position, and the clearly exhibited intention to limit the furthering of European colonial influence on the American continents as much and as quickly as possible, where the United States swiftly acquired a chance to bargain from the position of the leader, largely because the opponents it met in the face of Spain and Mexico were

quite weak. It must be noted that this expansionist policy in the American continents was put forward much earlier than the announcement of the Monroe Doctrine which is generally considered as the watershed between isolationism and increasing internationalism in American foreign policy.

The two principles mentioned can serve as a basis for explaining the decisions of American diplomats in the formative period. Only in their light can we understand the nature of probably the most crucial decision of the period – the declaration of neutrality in the war between France and Britain, which followed the French Revolution. The only possible decision, it was carefully taken and showed a lot of things: America was capable of sustaining itself as an independent country even in the face of immediate territorial danger through well-crafted diplomacy which maneuvered between the interests of France and Britain; the presidential institution could play a decisive role in determining the foreign policy course; public opinion – which was strongly opposed to Britain and strongly sympathetic to France – would always be a leading factor and sometimes a difficult barrier to overcome when considering international decisions. The increasing strength of the United States was indicated by the fact that despite the neutrality and the following amicable agreement with Britain which infuriated France, America was still able to achieve the same settlement with France (1800). It not only prevented war between the two countries but proclaimed the 1778 Franco-American alliance dissolved and untied American hands from any rigid commitment with a member of the European state system. Adding to the achievements of the period was the Pinckney Treaty, signed with Spain, which opened the Mississippi river to American shipping. It was a sign of the weakening power of Spain and of the growing confidence and stability of the United States.

The War of 1812 with Britain is considered the ultimate event, which firmly and irreversibly established American independence. Before that the United States had doubled its territory, purchasing Louisiana from France, after Napoleon's failure to seize Santo Domingo and his subsequent difficulties because of the war Britain had declared on France. Having doubled its territory, America emerged much stronger and prepared for the conflict with Britain brought about by the inevitable discussions surrounding American neutral shipping during the Franco-British war. Guided by prophetic insight, or

by sheer luck, president Madison decided to declare war on Britain, although had Napoleon succeeded in his final effort to gain dominance in Europe, America would have found itself in a very dangerous position. The formal reason for the war was the practice of impressments of American sailors by Britain and seizure of American vessels. British advantage due to the successes in the European war with Napoleon was counterbalanced by American naval victories and thus both adversaries entered the peace talks at equal positions. The treaty of 1814 acknowledged once and forever American independence in the minds of British leaders and it was no longer an issue in the relations between the two states.

The territorial growth of the United States continued with the acquisition of Florida and Oregon by means of the Transcontinental Treaty with Spain in 1819. Moreover, John Quincy Adams was able to lead the negotiations with Spain from the position of the stronger power and didn't accede to Spanish demand to abstain from support for the independence of Latin and South American Spanish colonies. In the long term America would impose itself as the economically dominant factor in the region, upon which all these republics depended.

The same policy comprised the backbone of the Monroe Doctrine announced in 1823:

The American continents...are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers. (...) [W]ith the governments who have declared their independence and maintained it, and whose independence we have...acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever vestige of isolationism American foreign policy could have had, it was stripped of it by the announcement of this imperialistic in its essence doctrine. The proposed formula of the United States keeping out of Europe and in turn assuming the right to demand that European states keep out of the Americas is weak and by no means presents a viable justification of a policy, mirroring the so abhorred practices of European colonial empires. In fact the Monroe Doctrine was just another step in the marching of

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<sup>1</sup> Cresson, W.P. *James Monroe*, The University of North Carolina Press, pp. 447-448

the spirit of the American people fulfilling with passion its “manifest destiny” to spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific the rule of freedom, self-reliance and democracy. Although imperialistic, this doctrine was in first place consistent with the American national security interests and goals and as long as the country had the potential to achieve them, it had the right. Thus, from this very early stage, it was evident that American foreign policy would always represent the unsolvable contradiction between the impulse to transmit its values to the oppressed and unjust and the exigencies of the national interest. The Monroe Doctrine was implemented in the following years, most ostensibly in the acquisition of Texas. Although achieved through the will of its people, it was due to instigated conflicts of the American population with Mexico. The resulting Mexican-American war brought about the purchase of huge Mexican territories, which presently comprise the states of New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah.

Having painfully resolved its internal controversial issues in the Civil War, the United States in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was already fully ripe to take over Great Britain’s role as the leading power in international relations. This process did not unfold without difficulties. They can be attributed to the reluctance of the majority of the people to support a policy that would contaminate the sacred ideals they had so heartily fought to incorporate in their state system and everyday lives. This reluctance was reflected in the foreign policy of every president in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who saw the inevitable place the United States would occupy in the world, but had to work patiently to win the minds of his own people in an enterprise to perpetuate the very same principles they revered, an enterprise he couldn’t dare to endeavor alone. In his last speech on September 5, 1901, one day before being shot by an assassin, president McKinley gave an impressive summary on the circumstances that made isolationism “no longer possible or desirable”.<sup>1</sup> Although he discussed primarily the striking technological and economic advances that had shrunk the world and “linked the nations together” more than ever, the implication of his speech, backed up by evidence of the “almost appalling” prosperity Americans enjoyed in all spheres of life and industry, was that the United States was already a world power and should take its place among the leaders of the world order.

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<sup>1</sup> *William McKinley 1843-1901 Chronology-Documents-Bibliographical Aids*, Oceana Publications Inc., pp. 72-73

Translated to the language of international affairs, the increasing globalization of the times, combined with the declining stability of the state system challenged by the rise of the German state, gave a green light and was at the same time a warning bell that America should abandon its isolationist strategy.

The next president Theodore Roosevelt added a more narrowly diplomatic dimension to this general statement on the reasons that render isolationism inappropriate in the new conditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was aware that the quiet and undisturbed prosperity of his nation in the previous decades was very much due to the European balance of power, which, as long as it functioned properly, did not allow any single country to ascend to such domination as to be able to threaten the existence of the United States. Steered by the apt guidance of the British “splendid isolation”, which at the same time monitored carefully all events in Europe and didn’t allow the balance to be altered, the Old Continent had enjoyed a century of peace. But this peace was precarious, because it depended too strongly on the premise that all countries were approximately equal in power and each one of them could be checked by the others if it attempted to dominate the continent. This equilibrium, however, was threatened by the unification of Germany and its rapid ascent into a Great Power under the ubiquitous guidance of Bismarck. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany displayed dangerous aspirations to European dominance on numerous occasions. It didn’t make effort to conceal these appetites, but the representatives of the European balance of power, led by the inertia of a whole century, left themselves to be trapped by the cunning system of treaties the German chancellor had invented. European rulers were getting involved in more elaborate alliances, bipartite and tripartite agreements that eventually made the participation of each one of them in a war between any other two inescapable.

Whether or not president Roosevelt made the same analysis and saw the inherent weakness of the balance-of-power system when confronted with Realpolitik does not lie within my scope of knowledge, but he was insightful enough to see the necessity of strengthening America’s position on the international arena and prepare the people, whose deeply ingrained attitude favored isolationism at any situation, for the possibility of entering an armed conflict far away from home.

In a world where the United States couldn't count on a self-sustainable balance of power anymore, it had to strive for its survival on its own and project its national security interests to such an extent, as would make it possible to assure American people of their safe lives. The Open Door policy toward China, started by McKinley and continued by Roosevelt, was one of the first steps that showed America's growing interest toward distant regions it considered important in geopolitical terms. The formal American proposal called for the establishment of equal trading rights to all nations in all parts of China, for recognition of Chinese territorial integrity and denouncement of the spheres of influence which prevented China from being an independent country. In reality the United States sought to achieve its own interests there, which were hindered by its lack of a sphere of influence in China.

In 1904, in connection with the American intervention in the Dominican Republic, the new foreign policy of the United States received its philosophic justification in the form of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that:

Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power...<sup>1</sup>

The moral dimension was not missed out:

All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship.<sup>2</sup>

It would be fair enough to Theodore Roosevelt to say that he acknowledged the necessity for a moral dimension in American foreign policy, because he knew well enough the nature of his people and certainly wouldn't conduct a power foreign policy without having secured the support, based on moral conviction, of the public opinion at home. He was correct in predicting that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States, often in

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<sup>1</sup> *Theodore Roosevelt 1858-1919 Chronology-Documents-Bibliographical Aids*, Oceana Publications Inc., p. 64

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

opposition to its desire, will be forced to apply sheer military power in order to establish freedom and democracy in war-ravaged societies.

The very realistic approach to international politics exhibited by Roosevelt, however, suffered of a disadvantage – he didn't dispose with the masterful command of the tools of rhetoric of his successor Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was a true visionary, who was able to transmit his whole essence as a human being to his people, so that they could whole-heartedly identify themselves with him, and identify the mindset he represented as a part of the idealistic spirit of the whole nation. The comparison between Wilson and Roosevelt is one of the most loved by historians because it is so attractive at first sight. They seem to be the perfect antonym couple that could serve as a foundation for comfortable generalizations over the different approaches to American foreign policy. The majority of people see Wilson as the messiah who tried to extricate international politics from the domination of power-based relations and petty calculations and intrigues substituting it for the rule of consensus and collective security, who tried to give every nation its own state and thus solve one of the scourge-problems of European countries, who tackled the impossible, but so appealing task of ending all wars with a victory for humanity as a whole. These characteristics are pointed out as substantial argumentation when proving why he was better than Roosevelt. But this analysis is missing out something very important – the outcome of Wilson's quest was unsuccessful. He will remain in American history as a hero because he dared to tackle the achievement of an impossible task with impossible means and sometimes American people love foolhardiness.

When we ask ourselves the question whether the entrance of the United States into the First World War was a mistake, we have to consider two aspects of this entrance – first, to what extent it was consistent with the national security interests of the country, and, second, to what extent the continued existence of democracy in Europe was contingent upon an American intervention. Even though the case is not as clear-cut as the case in the Second World War, it certainly does not pose a brain-breaking dilemma. America was already too big and powerful, and consequently too threatened by a supposed German win in the war, whose reverberations the increasing all-round globalization of the world would amplify, so as to remain uninvolved in such a major

military conflict. Moreover, American political values can easily be identified with exactly the same values that a possible German victory would eradicate by destroying the Franco-British “Entente cordial”. German militarism was the essential polarity to everything America used to stand for in its own eyes and in the eyes of many other peoples in the world. Sentences like that are generally considered clichés, but dismissing them as such doesn’t make them less valid.

In the light of these thoughts American participation into the First World War was an urgent necessity. Sometimes people do not need strong moral reasons in order to support their country’s participation in a war – the sinking of the American civil ship by a German submarine in 1917 is an obvious example. It is much more efficient to make people feel losing their security, than to appeal to the higher realms of their consciousness, as the decisive support for American intervention after the inception of unrestricted German submarine warfare clearly indicates. In fact, the strong moral justification with which Wilson loaded America’s entrance into the war inevitably geared very high expectations on the post-war settlement of international relations, which made the Versailles Treaty seem an even bigger flop than it really was.

Briefly described, the chief clauses of the peace treaty included placing the entire responsibility for the war on Germany (which wasn’t strictly true), and imposing reparations payments (20 billion gold marks for the first 2.5 years after the war). The territorial clauses included: restoring Alsace and Lorraine to France; placing the Saarland under French administration for 15 years; placing the Rhineland under allied occupation for 15 years and subsequently fully demilitarizing it; creating an independent Polish state; reducing the German army to 100 000 soldiers. Wilson’s Fourteen Points, intended by him to serve as a basis of the treaty were largely overlooked in their parts advocating open diplomacy without secret arrangements, but in his eyes the inclusion of the Covenant of the future League of Nations as an inseparable preamble to the Treaty compensated for any other shortcomings it might have had.

The difficulties of the peace settlement and its ultimate failure prove that the approach to the peace treaty is much more important than the approach to the war itself. It might be also true that if a country doesn’t know how to or doesn’t have the resources to impose a generally accepted and effective peace, it shouldn’t fight the war at all. In the

Versailles Treaty case the United States had the resource, and *thought* it had the knowledge how to shape the post-war world, but in the end it turned out that it lacked the will to do it. The ill success of the Treaty has also been attributed to European leaders' grudging obstinacy to accept the methods of new diplomacy that made them seek old-style decisions in a fundamentally changed world, which couldn't rely on the balance of power anymore. French leaders in particular are accused of persevering with their desire to impose very harsh postwar terms on Germany (such as the war guilt cause and the exorbitant amount of reparations), whereas Wilson is accused of meddling without invitation with centuries-old ethnic controversies in Central and Eastern Europe in his effort to create nation-states based on self-determination, that eventually the map of Europe, produced under his influence, was an even more unworkable mess than before.

In fact, what made the Versailles Treaty a complete failure was America's abdication to fulfill the commitments it had bound itself to by entering the war. Having turned the course of the war decisively into the Allies' favor, having given so much hope to European people (indicated by the enthusiastic crowds that met Wilson everywhere on his way to the Paris peace conference), cognizant of the fact that the balance of power did not exist anymore and something fundamentally new should be enforced on its place, aware of the helpless state of the destroyed economies of European countries (losers and victors alike) that could bring about, and very soon did, the development of utopian theories and the birth of crazy leaders, the United States should have found the will to remain in Europe and help the continent that had brought it into being, for the sake of its own security as well. Some people<sup>1</sup> point out that this "overwhelmingly internationalist country was turned in an isolationist direction as a result of a personal failure of leadership by a dying man" – throwing all the blame on Woodrow Wilson and his implacable refusal to compromise on the agreements he had reached in Versailles and incorporate some of Henry Cabot Lodge's reservations (aimed at receiving more guarantees to American security) to the final version of the treaty. As a result of the complicated conflict between Wilson and the Republicans in the Congress (which had been caused by Wilson with his refusal to appoint any Republican representative to the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Johnson in his article "*The Myth of American Isolationism – Reinterpreting the Past*", Foreign Affairs, May/June 1995

American delegation at the peace talks) the Treaty wasn't ratified at all. This worst possible outcome had many negative consequences: it deprived the treaty of legitimacy, precluded America's membership to the League of Nations, thus largely turning its initial purposes into a mockery, forced the United States to shrink into a self-imposed isolation and left European Allies constantly quarreling over the nature of their postwar treatment of defeated Germany.

Whether it is just to ascribe the burden of guilt for the Versailles Treaty solely to Woodrow Wilson is very debatable. Instead, a whole set of reasons exists, of which Wilson is only a tiny portion. Viewing the dispute over the ratification of the treaty from another angle, it may be true to say, that if the Congress had ratified it with Lodge's reservations No.2 and No.3, which decline any obligation of the United States to maintain military troops in Germany or to intervene to preserve the territorial integrity of another country as a corollary of its membership in the League of Nations, this membership would have been anyway useless. Thus, it wouldn't have made a substantial difference whether the Congress had ratified the Treaty with the reservations or not. Maybe it would have been wiser not to incorporate the Covenant of the League of Nations into the Treaty at all, because it was the apple of discord in America. If it wasn't present in the Treaty, America still wouldn't have committed itself to its membership, but at least the other clauses (especially the one about allied military occupation of the Rhineland) would have been enforced more decisively.

Another reason for the Treaty's failure might lie within the nature of the regime the Allies tried to establish in Germany after the First World War – democracy probably wasn't the most appropriate option for a country that had relied on military power and authoritarian rule for most of its success during the previous 45 years. Not only was the Weimar Republic loathed by German citizens, but its democratic political mechanisms opened the possibility for Hitler to come to power both legitimately (with strong public support) and legally (through regular elections).

Further on, the inherent weakness of the Versailles Treaty probably has nothing to do with it per se, but with the scope of the war. This was an unprecedented use of military force in which people and countries proved how dangerous and easily flammable the dark side of progress can be. People and their leaders were no longer able to discern the best

exit from the abruptness with which this general change was brought about, uncertainty captured their minds. A contemporary generation of people, born and brought up in a peaceful environment, cannot by any chance grasp what it means to be in the middle of nowhere, in a world that had just lost 10 million people not because of reasons that didn't depend on human will, but because human beings had consciously chosen to kill other human beings. The disillusionment was catastrophic. It is much easier to be an observer of a historic event than to be a participant in its unfolding when reality presses hard for decisions and time is ticking away. Maybe no one is to blame for the debacle of the Versailles Treaty.

There is certainly someone to blame for the Second World War, however. I do not mean Adolf Hitler – his guilt as villain No.1 has always been out of the question. There is somebody to be blamed for allowing Adolf Hitler to pursue and achieve his goals without any opposition, in fact – with cooperation. This somebody was exactly the one who had reasons to fear him the most. The politics of appeasement, whose symbol became the Munich Course (the surrender of Czecko-Slovakia to German demands) in the foreign relations of the Great Powers, had as devastating a result as World War One had had, because, apart from World War One itself, it was the most important root cause for The Second World War. The behavior of the leaders of the European democracies in the inter-war period is the best example, with the advantage of knowing the outcome of their policies, one can possibly get of complete blindness and lack of courage to assess soberly the poignant actuality of the threat nazism and fascism were posing to the world. Even the practitioners of the dead balance-of-power strategy would have been able to tackle German-Italian aggression better. Or maybe namely the shadows of this same balance-of-power behavior were lurking behind the actions of its successors who prided themselves that they were creating a world “safer for democracy”. The sordid irony of the situation is perfectly exemplified by the fact that the British prime-minister Chamberlain even received a Nobel peace prize for the generosity with which he sacrificed sovereign countries in order to ensure the tranquility of Western Europe. What makes the policy of appeasement even more abominable is the apparent innocence it was carried out with. It was not only that European leaders were not sensitive enough to the seriousness with which Hitler was preparing his country for the “gamble of the century” (although they are

substantially guilty on that paragraph too), but also the fact that they would, and did, particle countries into pieces for the sake of their serenity and still were able to sleep with a clear conscience at night. Sometimes there are cases in which moral reasons should not be sacrificed from the position of power at the expense of geopolitical and national security concerns. The Hitler case and the policy of appeasement it entailed is certainly one of those rare cases.

America intervened in World War II, literally, in order to save the world from evil. For once, moral and geopolitical concerns were not at odds with one another. Even so, there was a strong internal opposition against entrance into the war, on roughly the same grounds as opposition to the entrance in World War I. It can be argued that this opposition was more tenacious, because of the economic problems that the United States had experienced during the Great Depression and which had served as a perfectly acceptable excuse to indulge into its self-isolation even deeper. The reluctance to support American participation into the Second World War probably reflected an unarticulated, but still uneasy moral concern about “what if we fight this war only to squander the victory just as we did after World War I?”

In this line of reason, president Franklin Roosevelt should be given credit for sensibly and perseverantly steering the public attitude to the mindset of American participation in the war. What was evident to him in the first half of 1941 – that the Allies were in desperate need of help if Hitler was not to prevail – was certainly not evident to the majority of his people. In this situation the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent German declaration of war on the United States were an unexpected gift to Roosevelt. History was repeating itself once again, even more decisively.

The question is frequently asked how can an American alliance with its complete antipode in the face of the Soviet Union be justified. Winston Churchill has put it much better than I am able to do it: use the lesser evil in order to defeat the greater. No morality could apply here, since the question was one of sheer physical survival. It was a game neither of “catch me if you can”, nor of petty intrigues and friends&adversaries singling out – there was no other choice. If the United States hadn’t allied with Stalin and served as a barrier to his appetites and if he had defeated the Germans alone, probably today the whole world would be living in communism. There are cases when morality can be (and

it is desirable to do it) sacrificed at the expense of geopolitical concerns. The alliance with the Soviet Union was certainly such a case.

By the end of 1943 the immediate threat to physical survival was overcome and the question “are we going to win?” was transformed to “what is the best way to win?” Different people gave different answers to that question. Roosevelt’s position represents the omnipresent moral facet of American foreign policy wanting to impose itself on the morally incapacitated and lower-leveled Europeans. The moral aspect this time exhibited itself in a friendly, compromising attitude toward the Soviet Union. This attitude was justified by Roosevelt on the grounds that there was no system or ruling class so inherently hideous as to completely deny the apparent loftiness of the values “we, the good guys” were preaching. Roosevelt believed that cooperation with the USSR was possible. Moreover, it would be very difficult to reject Stalin’s claims for spheres of influence, because the truth was that his army had largely carried the burden of the war. He was certain to demand what he thought belonged to him.

Winston Churchill, on the other hand, argued that Stalin’s claims not only could be rejected, they *had* to be rejected. He insisted that the Allies fight the war with political goals on their minds. Toward the end of the war the Allies had to push as far to the East as it was possible. Instead, they allowed the Soviet troops to capture even Berlin first. Churchill’s view was that this immensely strengthened Stalin’s bargaining position, and, respectively, weakened the Allies’. According to him, the only thing that separated Stalin from Hitler was Stalin’s assuredness of the ultimate triumph of the communist ideology which made the Soviet leader confident that the win was only a matter of time, whereas Hitler was driven more by the madness of fury and the uncertainty of victory which made him more likely to gamble. This, however, did not mean that communism was more virtuous than nazism, it was just as dangerous, and therefore it was necessary not to make the same mistake as with the Germans in the 1930s. Ironically enough, even though Churchill had been right about Hitler (and was given credit for that by being finally elected as a prime-minister), and was right about Stalin, he was not listened to for the second time. The failure to follow his warnings is generally considered the cause for the Cold War.

Again, this traditional reasoning cannot be established as an ultimate viewpoint on the subject. Isn't it possible that Roosevelt also saw and understood the danger of the Soviet Union, but chose a conciliatory approach to it exactly on the grounds that it could be deterred? And wasn't Churchill's talk just a hypocritical garment of his intention to "sell" Eastern Europe to Stalin (as the famous episode with the small sheet of paper with the percentages he slipped into Stalin's palm during their Moscow meeting in 1945 might reveal) in order to secure peace and prosperity to Western? After all, Eastern Europe was only mess and confusion, why not leave Stalin take it, if he wants it so much, and keep the better part for ourselves?

What would have changed or not, had the Allied leaders pressed harder on Stalin remains in the sphere of conjecture. What can be stated with certainty is that the post-WWII settlement excelled by far the post-WWI settlement. Harry Truman and his administration applied an approach that took into account the mistakes of the Versailles Treaty and sought for a way to avoid them. And by anyone's standard it avoided most of them. Much effort was put into conveying to defeated Germany the sense that it was *once and forever* defeated. Instead of accommodating Roosevelt's view that American troops should leave Europe as soon as possible, Truman insisted that they remain in Germany as a constant reminder that a third attempt at world domination was impossible. America's role was seen as one of both an implacable enforcer of order and a partner ready to stretch out a hand and help Germany find its way back to "the family of civilized nations", provided it had the wish to do it. This dichotomy represents the following set of ideas and actions, which were in equilibrium during Harry Truman's presidency: moral issues and geopolitical concerns in American foreign policy (yet another time), the United Nations (a second, better try) and NATO (the organization that the Versailles Treaty needed so badly), the Marshall Plan and the remaining of American troops in Germany. It is comfortable and easy to think in dichotomies, isn't it?

But these dichotomies capture to a very crucial extent Truman's achievement – his extraordinary ability to put the irreconcilable principles of ideals and self-interest in American foreign policy to work together. There is, however, one event in Harry Truman's international relations record which leaves a bad taste in my mouth. The dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan was a mistake, because it crossed outside the

lines of that equilibrium paradigm. The reason lies within the faulty premises of the analysis that led to the decision. These premises allowed for a stronger emphasis on the geopolitical (i.e. national security) dimension over the moral one.

There are a number of justifications given for the use of the atomic bomb. First of all, it was necessary in order to save the lives of many American soldiers and shorten the war. Second, the Japanese would fight to the death and would accept the demand for unconditional surrender under no circumstance.

What the Japanese argue in their favor, on the other hand, is that the term “unconditional surrender” was too vague and was never explained satisfactorily to them. They were led to think that unconditional surrender would mean removing of the emperor from the throne and abolishing the monarchy. The Japanese prime-minister Suzuki publicly announced on June 9, 1945 that "Should the Emperor system be abolished, they [the Japanese people] would lose all reason for existence." The Japanese were taught to obey their emperor as a god, so if there would be no emperor after the end of the war, they would better fight and die with honors on the battlefield. Truman received advice from some of his administration to include in the surrender ultimatum a promise for establishing a constitutional monarchy in post-war Japan. This was not done on the grounds that it would give the Japanese hope to continue fighting, which they would anyway do.

In this situation two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing the instant death of 110 000 civilians, the instant injury of 130 000 civilians, and subsequent damage due to radiation, which no statistics can count.

Except for the explicitly stated reasons for that act, there might be others – more powerful and important. Although no American leader would acknowledge it, the bombing had something to do with a desire to retaliate to the Japanese for Pearl Harbor. This desire haunted the public opinion and probably influenced the president, even though he might have made an effort to distance himself of it. Moreover, there was a great deal of racial disrespect toward the Japanese in the United States, which wasn't a novelty springing up from the Second World War. As early as 1924 the Congress had passed an Exclusion Act which prohibited further immigration from Japan.

With respect to geopolitics the dropping of the atomic bomb was a mistake, because it hastened Soviet efforts to produce its own nuclear weapon and indirectly made it more unrelenting in the disputes over the spheres of influence. Thus, the dropping of the atomic bomb precipitated the start of the Cold War at a time when a chance to avoid it still might have existed, and was worth attempting.

With respect to morality, there is nothing which can justify the barbaric eradication of people. In most of the cases moral impulses may be compromised at the expense of reasonable and/or urgent security necessities, but there are a few cases when that is unforgivable. Such a case was the atomic bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.