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## **AN HISTORICAL REVIEW OF FOREIGN POLICY, 1784-1944**

A lecture delivered  
at the Naval War College  
on 18 September 1957 by  
*Professor Gordon B. Turner*

Gentlemen:

I have been asked to take a look at the first 160 years of American foreign policy from the lofty eminence of 1957 and, having taken that look, describe for you this morning just what foreign policy is, and what limitations are imposed upon those who frame it. This is the kind of assignment that makes association with the Naval War College so stimulating for civilians. It is at once a challenge and a source of pride that the naval staff should place such faith in the synthesizing powers of the academic mind. Since I have no wish to disabuse that trust, I am not at liberty this morning to follow the line expounded by some scholars — that for the most of our history we have had no foreign policy. For to do that, you see, would inevitably bring me to the end of this lecture with the rather bizarre statement that, having conducted a survey of American foreign relations, I can only conclude that there is no such thing as foreign policy.

But, of course, there is; it depends upon how we define it. If we were to agree with Ambassador Hugh Gibson that it is “a well rounded, comprehensive plan, based on knowledge and experience, for conducting the business of government with the rest of the world,” and that it is aimed at promoting and protecting the interests of the nation, knowing, of course, just what those interests are — well, in that case, we might say: we have no foreign policy. By his definition he has made the job too tough. How can it be expected that we should have a concrete plan for everything we do in world affairs? How can we be sure to protect the national interest when we don't always have knowledge

of the intentions and means of other nations, and, indeed, when we cannot even know precisely what our own interests are?

The national interest is another one of those elusive concepts which cannot be pinned down with exactitude. One distinguished American historian has written two fat volumes on the subject and has concluded that there has never been a single national interest which could be accepted by all as such. Walter Lippmann has written that for fifty years after the Spanish-American War the American people could not agree on what the true national interest was and therefore had no settled and generally accepted foreign policy.

So where do we stand? The first thing to be said is that foreign policy is too complex and elusive a term to lend itself to precision definition. On the basis of American history, immediately discard the idea that foreign policy entails having a comprehensive plan for everything we do in behalf of the national interest. As much as we would like to have one, as much as the military establishment feels the need for a positive directive for its own planning purposes, it is simply beyond the realm of reason to expect one in this area. And if we do expect one, we shall be deluding ourselves; we shall condemn the government for its failure to perform the impossible, and, perhaps to our detriment, we shall continue to wait for the impossible to occur.

This is a point I should like to underscore. Military personnel are accustomed to framing concrete plans; they study the planning process; they act on the basis of plans laboriously constructed, and it is essential that they should do so. Being the implementers of the nation's foreign policy they look to the State Department to give them a long-range directive which will enable them to formulate a military policy, to place orders for complex military hardware, and to set in motion the vast planning process by which ideas are turned into action. Unfortunately, the State Department is not always in a position to fulfill this expectation.

And if it did attempt to do so, if it did lay down concrete plans and rigid formulas, it would only have to alter them to meet new circumstances or damage the nation's security beyond repair.

Mr. George Kennan, that brilliant practitioner and expositor of Soviet-American relations, has said that foreign policy is reconstructed every morning, implying thereby that internal and external factors impinging upon foreign affairs change so rapidly that policies must be constantly reviewed and revised in order to keep them up-to-date. Others talk about the "seven year itch," referring, of course, to the fact that certain weapons require seven years from drawing board to mass production. They plead for a closing of the gap between seven years and every morning. They refer to matters military and technical, saying that the seven years cannot be reduced and that long-range planning is the very heart of military security. In this, they are correct.

They then go on to say that the Department of Defense must lay its plans in accord with national policy because military and foreign policies must not be allowed to get out of balance. In this, also, they are correct. Finally, they come to the conclusion that in order to close the gap foreign policy makers must be forced to make hard and fast decisions about how we will act in world affairs for the next several years. They must frame and promulgate a concrete, long-range plan on which the military establishment can act decisively. Here, gentlemen, they indulge in wishful thinking. And when they go one step further and charge that because State has no such plan it has no foreign policy, they are in error. Why? In order to answer this question we shall have to find out just what foreign policy is.

To begin with, foreign policy is a whole cluster of things, including courses of action and statements of intention. It is an accumulation of doctrines, traditions, ideologies and decisions previously made. It is a pattern of behavior toward other nations designed to promote and protect national ideals, principles and

material needs. It is a system of adjusting means to ends, factors to goals, power to principles. It is a set of aspirations and objectives.

I wonder whether I am reading your minds correctly. Are you thinking? Wow, here we go into the wild blue yonder of abstraction? Well, we are. I don't deny it. The very nature of the subject requires it. But I'll do my best to get down to earth before the hour is over.

Let's look a little more closely at this cluster of elements which is foreign policy as a first step in our descent to the concrete. I spoke of courses of action and statements of intention. More precisely, foreign policy constitutes a continuing evolution of courses of governmental action and reaction with reference to the governments of other nations. For example, the Monroe Doctrine evolved gradually. Originally, it constituted little more than a wish or a hope that we in this hemisphere might be left to work out our destiny unmolested. For the first thirty years or so it was not even considered a doctrine, but simply an aspiration. It was many decades before we put it into action by our own strength, and extended it to mean that we exercised police power over our near neighbors. Nevertheless, throughout its entire period of evolution from mild hope to tough action, it was a foreign policy of the United States.

It is sometimes thought that a government must ceaselessly be engaged in positive actions with respect to the rest of the world or it is drifting without a firm policy to guide it. But a policy of inaction may be policy nonetheless. The extended period of American withdrawal from European affairs during the nineteenth century did not mean the absence of policy. Withdrawal was not only a deliberate decision but a decision repeatedly affirmed in the most emphatic terms.

A recent example of inaction being characterized as lack of policy was the United States Government's behavior toward Japan in the 1930's. Lack of policy, it is said, precipitated Pearl

Harbor. The Roosevelt administration, however, *did* have a policy toward Japan — a negative one, to be sure — perhaps it can be called a deliberate policy of drift because we did not have the physical means, the moral power or the will to do more. *But*, for good or ill, it was a conscious policy of letting events take their course in the Far East while we concentrated on doing what little we could with the means at hand in another portion of the globe. We are at perfect liberty to condemn this policy, but we should not deny its existence.

There are occasions, of course, when mere statements of intention constitute foreign policy. A government has an objective or a set of objectives and aspirations which it announces publicly or more discreetly through diplomatic channels. If it has the strength in being to carry out its words, it may not have to act at all. The announcement of intent will be synonymous with achievement; the statement of intent itself constitutes action in this case. Where the announcement is official and is obviously meant as a serious and sincere statement of purpose, it must be considered as foreign policy even though the means of implementation do not immediately exist. Such was the case with the Monroe Doctrine which we did not have the means within ourselves to carry out, should other powers hold it in contempt.

Another illustration of how statements without power may constitute foreign policy is to be found in the Open Door Notes. Secretary John Hay began in 1899 by seeking declarations from all the powers then engaged in dismembering China that they would not discriminate one against the other within their own spheres of influence. Although all of these powers made it clear that they had no intention of helping the United States in this endeavor, we continued to expand our statements of intention until American policy in the Far East finally came to be defined as maintenance of the integrity of China and the Open Door in the Orient. Now, this was no self-implementing policy and the United States certainly lacked the armed might to enforce it against the will of the

major Pacific Powers. Yet, the United States Government continued to stagger along, proclaiming principles, compromising where necessary, until, a quarter of a century later, it managed to get a nine-power agreement embodying the principles of the Open Door and the territorial integrity and administrative independence of the Sick Man of the Far East which it had so long sought.

This was all achieved through diplomatic means, but let's look at foreign policy in time of war. Either courses of action or statements of intent precipitate wars, but what happens in the midst of war itself? It has often been said that during our wars foreign policy has been forgotten, the diplomats have sat in the shade and given the soldiers their place in the sun, and the political objectives for which the wars were undertaken have been submerged in the drive and fury of achieving military victory. This, to a certain extent, is inevitable and true, but not completely so. Political objectives are often altered or held in abeyance while military expediency dictates the course of events, but this does not mean that foreign policy has totally collapsed. In modern times — that is, in the period with which we are concerned this morning — warring nations have usually generated and proclaimed a set of war aims, a statement of purposes, which constitute policy. The purposes may be unattainable; the aims may be unwise; but they are policy nonetheless, and as long as war continues the armed forces are the implementers of that policy. As the course of events change through military action, new war aims are proclaimed and new directives are given to the military forces to accord with the new situation. Thus, foreign policy continues to exist, and it continues to be made up of courses of action and statements of intent.

Earlier, I mentioned not only action but reaction with respect to other nations. The point here is simply put. We are dealing with an area beyond the jurisdiction of our own government where actions and intentions of foreign powers impose limitations upon

what we can do toward achieving our objectives. This means one thing, if it means nothing else: we cannot always exercise *our* will. We must not lay down rigid plans; we must be ready to take advantage of opportunities, sometimes holding our principles in abeyance, sometimes retreating, at others advancing our purposes as the situation permits.

For example, during the American Revolutionary War it was the general will of the people to break away not only from England but from all of the Continental Powers who had embroiled us in their colonial wars. We were suspicious of France; we distrusted Spain; yet, we sought alliances with both. We took advantage of France's power and desire to bring England to her knees, and reluctantly but unwaveringly wooed her support. Violating our republican principles, and risking future subordination to a foreign power, we joined with France because we could not achieve our primary objective of independence in any other way. We reacted against the hated policy of England, took advantage of the opportunity provided by France to gain the most important of our objectives, and only later on broke away from all of Europe to achieve our other ends.

Too often we criticize our foreign policy — and I am an offender in this respect, too — for not having prevented things from happening which, after all, we could not prevent in any case because we could not control the actions of foreign governments, but could only react to them within limited channels. I need cite no examples here. Rather, let me move on to the next cluster of elements which describe the nature of foreign policy; namely, the accumulation of doctrine, traditions, ideologies and decisions previously made.

If, at times, we are forced to react to situations outside our borders in ways we do not want, equally there are times when we frame our policies in accord with certain patterns which history imposes upon us. Recently there has been a spate of literature condemning American foreign policy for having been too



idealistic, for having involved itself in a mass of sentimentalities and Utopian theories, and for having allowed the true interests of the nation to be neglected. Yet, even its most eloquent and responsible critic maintains that our foreign policy must be the projection and expression of what we are like as a national community; that our domestic values will determine our attitude toward foreign affairs rather than vice versa — that, in short, the tail does not wag the dog.

The issue posed is this. Should we, in framing our foreign policies, follow the dictates of our own conscience and be guided by our principles, or should we react to the ways of others who employ power politics and who engage in unending power struggles? The answer that history gives is that we should and have done both. There have been times when we have entered wars though desiring peace; there was a time when, with an uneasy conscience, we plunged into imperialistic ventures, thus violating our avowed ideals; and there have been periods when we became entangled in the affairs of the outside world when we much preferred to remain aloof.

Yet on the whole I should say that we have, for better or for worse, been guided in our foreign relations by the values we cherish, by the traditions which history has furnished, and by the doctrines and decisions of the past. How could it be otherwise? How could we maintain any kind of a reasonably consistent foreign policy merely by reacting to the ways of others? Without some polestar to guide us, we would end up with a collection of short-range, contradictory policies designed to meet specific international situations but in no way leading us steadily toward the national interests which foreign policy seeks to promote.

All nations allow their policy to be influenced in some degree by their preference for one kind of society as against another. This country traditionally has had a vision of America as a haven for the oppressed, a land where the individual is free to develop along lines best suited to his own capabilities, a country in which

government is designed to protect the individual in the exercise of certain natural rights, including traditionally the rights of life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness. It was in pursuit of this vision that we declared our independence from a government which was failing to accord those rights. It is the reason why we withdrew from the affairs of Europe, engaged for three-quarters of a century in vigorous expansion of our frontiers, and threw open our doors to the less fortunate of other lands. Wasn't it eminently reasonable, in conformity with these aspirations, and while affairs in Europe permitted us to do so, that we should have devoted ourselves to the development of our own strength, our own concepts of liberty and progress, rather than to have asserted ourselves in the external world? This was the essence of the Monroe Doctrine. This was foreign policy — policy as an ideal, a doctrine, an aspiration.

Eventually, this vision was extended to apply to other lands. We developed the concept that all democracies were good, especially if they were created in our own image. We began to feel that individuals everywhere should have the opportunities of Americans. It wasn't long then before we found justification for engaging in commitments in the Caribbean, the Philippines and in China. American imperialism was never wholly materialistic. Even at its worst it intended to give the subject peoples some of the benefits of freedom. At times, economic and strategic motives existed; at others, not. But at all times there was some idealistic basis for our action.

This desire for universal human progress has influenced our foreign policy in other ways. It has produced other doctrines than that of President Monroe. It was the basis of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, Mr. Hay's Open Door, President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, Mr. Hull's Good Neighbor Policy, and the Truman Doctrine. The Jeffersonian concept, that human beings are innately good and can progress if government and environment permit it, has surely been the basis for expending so much energy

on arbitration treaties. In one period of about thirty-five years this nation entered into 97 international arbitrational contracts of one kind or another. The reasoning here was apparently based on the belief that there is an inherent harmony of interests among nations and it was up to us to make that harmony a fact. The reasoning behind our Utopian efforts to outlaw war, to disarm, to abolish the use of armed force in international disputes, was again based upon the concept that only through peace could man progress and fulfill his destiny.

It is such concepts as these — that democracy is good, that conquest is immoral, that universal peace is attainable — which shape the pattern of our behavior toward other nations. And this is so primarily because the interests we seek to promote and protect through foreign policy include our ideals and principles as well as our material security. A few weeks ago on this platform Admiral Ingersoll in his welcoming address spoke to this point when he said: all nations have their national interests, national philosophies and ideals, and these are precious to them. Under no circumstances would I presume to put words in Admiral Ingersoll's mouth, but from this statement I suspect he, too, believes that the national interests which we seek to promote encompass not only our physical security but our principles and ideals as well.

And here is where those go astray who charge us with neglecting the national interest, claiming we have a moralistic approach to foreign affairs and are too much preoccupied with ideals. Apparently in their minds national interest means nothing but physical security. This presumably is to be obtained by pursuing policies aimed at maintaining a balance of power, and this can be done only by hard-headed professional diplomats sitting behind closed doors immune to the voice of the people, playing power politics, and operating in a vacuum with respect to morality and national ideals. One gets the impression that this concept of "national interest" is entirely a rational one, that it is free from

any value judgments and can be arrived at by estimating the numbers of lives and dollars and cents we are willing to expend upon survival.

American history tells a different story. It reveals a multiplicity of interests which embrace not only the need of society for security against armed aggression, but the public demand for higher standards of living, and the maintenance of stability in national and international affairs. National interests are the continuing ends for which a nation acts. They tend to be synonymous with long-standing traditions and habits of thought, and, of course, they differ among different nations.

In the United States, only in the earliest and again in the most recent periods has survival been a main concern of foreign policy, because during the middle years of our history there was no external threat to us. But, even when survival has been an issue, we have not limited our interests to that single point. While we were still weak and surrounded by enemies actual or potential, the men who shaped our policies and led national opinion were concerned with other things as well. Even Alexander Hamilton, who had the clearest conception and greatest concern of any of the founding fathers with the physical aspects of national security, was not without an ideal or vision of what the United States should be, and he expounded a foreign economic policy to achieve that goal. He was perhaps more interested than any other member of the Constitutional Convention in creating a strong central government for the express purpose of defending our shores against foreign aggression; yet, when the Convention began moving away from his ideal of what our society should be, he picked up his bags and walked out.

Hamilton was an economic nationalist, believing in a system of economy which would produce and support great commercial and industrial leaders. These were the men to whom the national government should look for support. Jefferson, on the other

hand, was an agriculturalist. He believed that the free and unfettered farmer was the only sound support of a democratic state. He was an environmentalist, conceiving that industries created cities, cities created slums, and slums produced corrupt men incapable of governing themselves. For Jefferson, then, agriculture was the only way of life for a free and healthy republic. Land, and plenty of it, was what the United States needed. Jefferson, therefore, held that the national interest called for the acquisition of adjacent areas for cultivation by the farmers of the future. This vision, or ideal, he was able to realize in the Louisiana Purchase. The primary motivation for that act was not, as some people conceive, to remove potential enemies from our backyard. Indeed, the Purchase might well have plunged us, weak as we were, into war with Spain, which vigorously opposed the transfer of this territory to the United States. Jefferson took that risk because his concept of the nation's welfare called for such a step.

The influence of the democratic ideal on foreign policy is naturally strong in any democratic nation. The French revolutionaries in the 1790's tried impetuously to force their ideals upon the rest of Europe. England, when she had the means to back up her words, was not averse to introducing democratic ideals into her relations with other nations. In this country at the end of the 18th century, when we could ill afford the luxury of British hostility, some eminent Americans were willing to incur her wrath merely out of sympathy with the French Revolution. And, later, we came within an ace of declaring war on France and England simultaneously for somewhat similar reasons.

Surely one basis for the Monroe Doctrine was the democratic ideal. The declaration praised the democratic principle and exalted democratic forms in contrast to the monarchies of Europe. Its origin lay in sympathy with the Latin American revolutions which had thrown off monarchical rule, and its intent was to see that monarchy was not restored. American history is replete with examples of the democratic ideal shaping foreign policy. This

government acted quickly to recognize the Second French Republic, brought about through revolution. It gave the Hungarian revolutionary, Kossuth, a welcome which takes second place only to Lindbergh's ticker-tape parade down Broadway. Wilson's war to save democracy, and his call for the German people to throw off the yoke of their Hohenzollern rulers so that they could have peace and freedom, are obvious examples of the democratic ideal at work in foreign policy.

This ideal has been so pervasive, so consistent, in American diplomatic history, that I think we must conclude that it has not only influenced policy but has been one of the interests that policy promotes. Despite changing forms of expression, national interests are the constants rather than the variables of foreign relations, as you well know. Being few in number but durable in nature, they provide the broad framework within which policies are developed.

But, of course, foreign policy is more than a set of ideals; it is more than a pattern of behavior designed to promote national interests. These things constitute policy in the abstract. They are important because they are an integral part of the nature of foreign policy, but policy has its concrete side too. National interests always exist, but they are not always in sharp focus. When, however, some act or statement of a foreign government seems to threaten one of the nation's interests, or some pressure or expectation or demand within society requires that a particular interest be vigorously promoted, it then becomes an immediate and definite objective which requires the active exercise of power or influence to establish it beyond dispute.

In this sense policy is a means to an end, and the national calculation of the means-ends relationship is the very heart of foreign policy. The problem of deciding what goals to achieve, which of the many purposes or interests it is most vital to serve, is not easy; but the problem of correlating means and ends is

infinitely more difficult. No nation has the power to promote all of its interests simultaneously; it may not even have the means to achieve its one most vital objective. The task of adjusting a variety of resources to a variety of goals — that is, of balancing power and policy — is the principal problem of the policy-maker. And it is further complicated by the necessity of having to feed into this equation the powers and policies of other states, enemy and friend alike. In a very real sense the weighing of information about the power, the institutions, the interests, purposes and policies of other states spells success or failure for one's own policy.

But I don't want to get into that complex business this morning. Rather, let's consider the power formula as it applies at home. Walter Lippman has written that "a foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power." Essentially he is correct in this, although I would argue with him that foreign policy is not simply a matter of commitments. Nevertheless he goes on to define his terms in this way, and I quote:

"I mean by a *foreign commitment* an obligation, outside of the continental limits of the United States, which may in the last analysis have to be met by waging war. I mean by *power* the force which is necessary to prevent such a war or to win it if it cannot be prevented. In the term *necessary* power I include the military force which can be mobilized effectively within the domestic territory of the United States and also the reinforcements which can be obtained from dependable allies."

Thus says Mr. Lippmann. Now if we are willing to content ourselves with defining foreign policy in such narrow terms — as a balance of commitments and military power — I am willing to concede that we have no foreign policy now and probably never had one.

But the means of foreign policy are no more confined to military strength than the ends are confined to formal obligations which must be met if necessary by war. Strength is composed of both physical and moral elements; it can be either material or nonmaterial. Our geographic position has always been an element of strength which our policy-makers could employ to great advantage, as Admiral Mahan pointed out here at the War College many years ago. Industrial potential and economic strength have both served us well. Population is a factor in the national calculation of power. I don't mean that population in itself is necessarily a source of strength. A rising birth rate in an overpopulated country may compel a policy of expansion and lead to disastrous war. Conversely, a country with a small population can be strong beyond its numbers by possessing political unity, common ideals and a balanced economy. Again, as Admiral Mahan said, it is not mere numbers that count but the characteristics and abilities of the people. Yet the demographic factor, when associated with other factors, is part of the formula for estimating strength. The same can be said with regard to the military establishment. Sheer numbers of troops may once have been a valid gauge of military strength, but no longer. At a minimum, military power means trained troops, weapons adaptable to several kinds of war, and a logistic capacity which will permit a flexible strategy. As with the population factor, the military component must be judged in relation to industrial capacity, national will and political stability.

So much for the types of means available. There still remains the difficult business of adjustment and balance, the determination of what minimum means can be brought to bear for the accomplishment of the nation's goals. And American history is a rich mine of information for this purpose.

To begin with, American independence was conceived in the seed of popular ideals; it was born through the painful labor of French and American military effort, and it was permitted to grow to manhood because the struggle for power in Europe left



no nation free to crush it. It lived by the sufferance of the balance of power abroad. It is worthy of note that, while military power should rationally accompany a policy of expansion at the expense of others, only once during the whole course of American territorial expansion on this continent did we resort to war. The frontier from the Appalachians to the Mississippi was secured through diplomatic negotiation by a nation militarily exhausted. The vast region known as the Louisiana Purchase was secured from Napoleon despite his promise to the Spaniards that he would not alienate it. The acquisition of West Florida was brought about by a revolution which we did nothing to discourage and which we summarily exploited. East Florida came to us without war, although unofficial military pressure played a part. Texas, true to its traditions, came into the United States of its own accord, but, again, only after a revolution which American citizens as individuals did much to support. It was intended that cold cash was to be the means of bringing the California territory into the fold, but here was one of those instances I mentioned a moment ago when calculation of another nation's intentions, abilities and interests is a necessary part of formulating a successful foreign policy. We miscalculated with Mexico, went to war, achieved victory, and then paid her anyway. And so it went to the tip of Alaska.

During all of this period, and indeed up until the 20th century, the United States was conducting its foreign policy under the latent protection of the British Navy. As you know, the Monroe Doctrine was operative only because England willed it so. She would have gladly joined us publicly in this declaration, but President Monroe and his successors preferred the appearance of acting unilaterally. Thus the United States, although she lacked power within herself commensurate with the pronouncements, nevertheless had the sea power of another invisibly on her side. When, after the turn of the century and with the rise of Germany and Japan, England was no longer able to act as a makeweight in the European balance of power or secure us under the mantle of her protection, we mistakenly extended our commitments —

forgetting that power and policy must be balanced. Americans had become so accustomed to their security that they forgot that its foundations lay outside the United States. As George Kennan says, "They mistook our sheltered position behind the British fleet and British Continental diplomacy for the results of superior American wisdom and virtue in refraining from interfering in the sordid differences of the Old World." The power factor in foreign policy which 18th century Americans thoroughly understood, gradually slipped from the minds of nineteenth century statesmen, and seemed to disappear altogether in the 20th.

It was at this time that the United States began to accumulate interests and commitments in the Far East incommensurate with its own political and military power. Only in the Western Hemisphere did American power keep pace with policy. In the Far East things went from bad to worse until, in the Washington Disarmament Conference 1921-22, we deliberately stripped ourselves of the power to command the western Pacific while increasing our commitment to defend the integrity of China. Here, indeed, was a strange spectacle: an American Secretary of State sitting at a conference table with a British First Lord of the Admiralty and a First Sea Lord telling them just what ships they should scrap and what they might keep. Secretary Hughes opened the Washington Conference with the customary opening-day banalities, while the delegates settled back in their seats expecting no excitement. In this, they were not disappointed, but then came a sharper note. Logically, if somewhat undiplomatically, Mr. Hughes told the delegates that the only way to disarm was to disarm, and not in the distant future but immediately. He then proceeded to strike one American capital ship after another from the active list. Having neatly disposed of the United States Navy, he then proceeded to attack the British and Japanese navies until the tonnage ratio of capital ships in the American, British and Japanese navies was 5-5-3 respectively. The immediate reaction in the hall was one of stunned silence. Then Senators, Representatives and Supreme Court Justices broke into wild applause. This was

indeed the greatest naval encounter on record. In fifteen minutes Charles Evans Hughes, Secretary of State, had managed to sink more warships than all the admirals in the world had sunk in a cycle of centuries. As one British newspaper man put it: all we wanted to do was go away and think.

The Japanese, although they secured in this battle undisputed command of the Far Pacific, refused to ratify the agreement until we had promised not to fortify further our bases in the Pacific. Even after this concession, ten years later, the Japanese repudiated the Washington Treaty — as they had a perfect right to do — by giving one year's notice. The Japanese people didn't like being on the short end of the stick. As their ambassador pithily put it: 5-5-3 sounds too much to Japanese ears like Rolls Royce-Rolls Royce-Ford.

We may condemn the Washington Conference for failing to protect one of our vital interests; we may call it naive and unrealistic. But it is to be remembered that it came about through pressure exerted by the American people on Congress, and by Congress upon the administration of Warren Gamaliel Harding. The fury for disarmament in those recent years is difficult to recapture today. It produces such strange spectacles as the suggestion from a leader of the United States Chamber of Commerce that all of the antiquated cannon encumbering our public parks should be carted off to the dump yards. Groups of citizens drew up monster petitions calling for disarmament. In St. Louis, a huge dial was erected in a public square. With each thousand signatures the hand moved forward, and with each 10,000 a courier was sent rushing off to Washington to spread the word.

This spectacle of public opinion influencing the formulation of American foreign policy was not unique, although it is perhaps as exaggerated an example as we can find. Ordinarily, public opinion does not operate effectively on specific issues of foreign affairs so much as it does on the general principles on which

policy is based. Washington's Farewell Address, in which he warned against our involving ourselves too deeply in European affairs, was not the result of pressure from the people; yet, over the years its message became part and parcel of American tradition. Washington had said: "it is our true policy to steer clear of *permanent* alliances with any portion of the foreign world . . . but we may safely trust to *temporary* alliances for extraordinary emergencies." In the course of repetition, however, this distinction between temporary and permanent alliances was submerged and finally disappeared. Americans came to look upon isolation as immutable, as a policy to be followed under any circumstances and at all cost. When conditions at home and abroad altered, and made isolation an unwise course of policy, the tradition was so deeply ingrained in the American public that it became virtually impossible to change it. In the 1920's and '30's it became almost pathological in its intensity; and foreign policy came to be based upon emotion rather than on reason.

To be sure, public opinion played a vital role in bringing on the Spanish-American War by one of those sudden and sweeping changes that occasionally occur in national mood. Yet history indicates, and public opinion polls confirm, that most questions of foreign policy are far too complicated and technical for the average citizen to do more than indicate his general preference for one trend rather than another in foreign affairs. We wouldn't be too far off in saying that about a third of the American people are unaware of any specific issue of foreign affairs; perhaps a half are aware but uninformed about international issues, and less than 20% consistently show knowledge of such problems. This being the case, old habits of thought, political principles and moral attitudes — rather than detailed knowledge — provide the popular guidance for framing foreign policy. Almost every student of the American scene agrees that the problem of foreign policy in this country is the problem of the public mind. As a member of the foreign policy planning staff, Charles Burton Marshall, puts it:

**“Ours is an accountable government. Acceptability to popular opinion is certainly a factor in the conduct of foreign policy. Popular opinion is not of much, if any, value in helping in the discovery of answers to the problems in this field. It certainly counts, however, in setting bounds to the area of maneuver available to those charged with responsibility.”**

Professor Dexter Perkins puts it this way:

**“If there is one thing clearer than another to the historian, it is that the American people will never hand over their affairs to a small diplomatic caste, however wise that staff may be. They have, almost from the beginning of their government, insisted upon having a voice in foreign affairs; they stirred up all kinds of trouble for General Washington in his second term; and ever since, whenever they felt strongly, they have insisted upon making themselves heard.”**

George Kennan, in his excellent little treatise on American diplomacy from 1900 to 1950, gave his formula, which he believed to be coldly realistic, for what we should have done from 1913 on to protect and promote the national interests in a world involved in war. Having given his formula, he then went on to say:

**“But I think I hear one great, and even indignant objection to what I have suggested . . . . People will say to me: ‘You know what you have suggested was totally impossible from the standpoint of public opinion; that people in general had no idea that our interests were affected by what was going on in Europe in 1913; they would never have dreamed of spending real money for armaments in time of peace; that they would never have gone into a war deliberately, as a result of cold calculation about the balance of power elsewhere . . . . You hold yourself out as a**

realist, and yet none of these things you are talking about were even ever within the realm of possibility from the standpoint of domestic realities in our own country.' ”

And then Mr. Kennan replies to his hypothetical critics:

“I have no quarrel with this argument. I am even going to concede it. But I still have one thing to say about it. . . . A nation which excuses its own failures by the sacred untouchableness of its own habits can excuse itself into complete disaster.”

And with Mr. Kennan's statement I shall not argue. I merely wish to point out that in a democracy such as ours it is public opinion that often calls the tune. No matter what their convictions, policy-makers must take some account of the domestic climate of opinion. Under popular government, it's impossible wholly to ignore the power of appeal which certain broad generalizations hold with the public. A failure to assess the force of these conceptions is a failure to understand the motivating forces of American diplomacy.

Now then, during the course of this lecture I have indicated explicitly or implicitly some of the factors which impose limitations on the formulation of foreign policy. Most of these restrictions derive from the nature of foreign policy itself. One task of the policy-maker is to identify the national interests which include both physical security and the principles and ideals the nation lives by. A second task is to calculate the complex material and nonmaterial resources of the nation which can be brought to bear to promote these interests. If the various interests are in harmony with one another, or if there is one overriding interest which has the support of a united people, the problem of means will be minimized, for then resources can be tapped without popular protest. If the interests to be promoted cannot all be achieved, or if ideals and reality are in contradiction, some will have to

give way temporarily; a balance between means and ends will have to be created, and a policy adopted flexible enough to maintain the balance despite changing interests and changing resources and changing national moods.

Finally, the policy-maker must assess the international situation; that is, he must attempt to analyze the interests and means of other nations, and feed this information into his domestic equation to be sure that the proper balance is maintained. This division between internal and external factors and between means and ends is, of course, an artificial one, made here merely for the purpose of presentation. In practice, consideration of all these elements is nearly simultaneous. And the multiplicity of interests and ideals, the variety and changing nature of the internal and external factors which restrict the achievement of national objectives, make it well nigh impossible to frame a long-range, consistent and settled foreign policy. We are constantly tinkering with the mechanism, the organization, the process by which policy is made, but I would suggest that no system can be devised which will make rational a process which has in it so much of the irrational and the emotional. If we keep in mind that what we are dealing with here is essentially a balance, an adjustment between means and ends, we will more readily realize that insistence on rigid plans is a mistake. If we understand the true nature of foreign policy, we will have more tolerance toward those who frame it.

## BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH

### Professor Gordon B. Turner

Professor Turner received his A. B., A. M., and Ph. D. degrees from Princeton University. During World War II, he served in the United States Army. Following the war, he was a research assistant at Princeton University on a Marine Corps History Project. From 1950 to 1952, he was an instructor in History at Princeton University and was also a research assistant on an Organizational Behavior Project there. During 1952-53, he was Director of a Military History Project. Since 1952, he has been Assistant Professor of History at Princeton.

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Professor Turner is the editor of *A History of Military Affairs in Western Society Since the Eighteenth Century*.