Three Foreign Policies

Compare and contrast the foreign policies of the three presidents: Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft, and Woodrow Wilson.

Instructions
Read the Three Foreign Policies article. As a group, fill in the information about each president’s foreign policy. Afterward, each individual will need to evaluate which policy their school of imperialistic thought would prefer.

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Evaluate: Which foreign policy/policies would your figure prefer? Explain.

Evaluate: Which foreign policy/policies would you personally prefer? Explain.
What was the Monroe Doctrine?

In the early 1800s, the United States was beginning to recognize that it had enormous potential in expansion and growth. During this time, the Spanish colonies in Latin America were slowly gaining their independence and these vulnerable colonies were now up for grabs should the new Latin American countries not be able to establish a stable form of government.

The U.S. foreign policy at this time was guided by two goals. The first goal was to keep the United States free of foreign alliances and out of foreign conflicts. The second was to expand the United States across the North American continent. As Americans began to look outward in the late 1800s, they debated the nation’s proper role in world affairs.

One of the most notable milestones of President James Monroe’s administration was the establishment of his Monroe Doctrine. With the help of John Quincy Adams in December of 1823, Monroe delivered a message to Congress and the rest of the world that set forth the following principles, which would later become known as the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine basically stated:

1. The Western Hemisphere was no longer open for European colonization;
2. The political system of the Americas was different from Europe (democracy vs. monarchy);
3. The United States would regard any interference in Western hemispheric affairs as a threat to its security; and
4. The United States would keep out of European wars and would not disturb existing colonies in the Western Hemisphere.

In one sense, this doctrine was an act of isolationism, with America withdrawing from the political powers of Europe. But it was also a recognition of a changing world order.

The doctrine became the basis for a good deal of high-handed interference in South American affairs as the United States embarked on a path of interfering in Central and South America.

Three Presidents, Three Foreign Policies

Watching England, Germany, France, and Belgium spread their global empires in Asia and Africa, America concentrated its imperialist intentions by going to war with Spain in what would be known as the Spanish American War.

By going to war with Spain and gaining overseas possessions, President McKinley had set the stage for a more aggressive foreign policy.

The next three presidents—Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson—pursued their own policies. But all three gave the United States an even greater role in world affairs.

Although their foreign policies differed, each president intervened abroad to pursue American goals.

Some goals were realist, such as controlling access to foreign resources.

Other goals were idealist, such as promoting democracy.

In developing foreign policy, the guiding principle for all three presidents was to serve the national interest.

The national interest is the set of goals—political, economic, military, and cultural—that a nation considers important.

Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson carried out foreign policies they believed would advance American interests.

The cartoon on the right shows how Uncle Sam is taking over different cultures and training them to meet his interests.
Roosevelt Expands U.S. Involvement Overseas

Theodore Roosevelt applied an energetic spirit to foreign policy. He wanted to make the United States a great power that could exert influence around the world.

He believed that the country must meet any challenge to its national interest overseas. Roosevelt once wrote, “I have always been fond of the West African proverb: ‘Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.’”

He believed in working quietly and patiently to achieve goals overseas but using force if necessary. Roosevelt’s strong-arm approach to foreign affairs became known as the Big Stick Policy.

In 1904, Roosevelt formalized this policy in a major address to Congress. He reminded his audience that the Monroe Doctrine was designed to prevent Europeans from interfering in the Americas.

Yet he noted that nearly a century later many countries in the Western Hemisphere were still too weak to defend themselves. Roosevelt asserted (insisted) that the United States therefore must use “international police power” to preserve peace and order in the hemisphere and protect American interests.

He claimed that this power would help protect weak nations and was a direct extension of the Monroe Doctrine. For that reason, his statement became known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. A corollary is a proposition that is a logical extension of a principle.

Over the next several decades, the United States intervened (stepped in) repeatedly in Latin America and the Caribbean. It sent troops to stop rebellious behavior and prop up rulers who supported U.S. interests.

Roosevelt and his successors claimed that these actions were necessary to promote stability in the region, but many critics saw them as an exercise of imperial power.

Roosevelt also used diplomacy to help bring peace to a foreign region. In 1905, he mediated a conflict between Japan and Russia, which were fighting to control Korea and Manchuria. For his efforts in ending the war, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906.

However, the treaty left both Japan and Russia dissatisfied and resentful of the United States.

Evaluate: Would your character agree, disagree, or partially agree with Roosevelt’s Big Stick Policy? How would your character respond to Roosevelt’s reactions concerning the events in Latin America? Japan and Russia?

Taft Advances U.S. Economic Interests

After becoming president in 1909, William Howard Taft continued the main thrust of Roosevelt’s foreign policy but shifted to economic goals.

His policy, which became known as Dollar Diplomacy, was to encourage and protect American trade and investment in Latin America and Asia.

Taft believed that strong economic presence overseas would advance American interests.

Taft claimed that Dollar Diplomacy would limit the use of force overseas. But the United States continued to intervene militarily.

In Nicaragua, for example, the U.S. supported a revolt that brought a pro-U.S. leader into power in 1911. American banks then provided loans to the new government. The government was corrupt and unpopular, however, and a new revolt broke out in 1912. Taft sent marines to put it down and to protect American business interests. The United States kept troops in Nicaragua almost continuously until 1933.

Evaluate: Would your character agree, disagree, or partially agree with Taft’s Dollar Diplomacy? How would your character respond to Taft’s reactions concerning the events in Nicaragua?

Wilson Champions Democracy Around the Globe

When Woodrow Wilson became president in 1913, he tried to take a moral approach to foreign relations.

He called this policy Moral Diplomacy. It was based on democratic ideals, rather than economic investment or the use of force.

The United States should use its power to aid “the development of constitutional liberty in the world,” Wilson said, by basing its foreign policy on “human rights, national integrity, and opportunity…”

Wilson also introduced a concept called Self-Determination in to American foreign policy. By this he meant the right of other peoples to determine their own government, free of outside influence.

In dealing with the countries of Latin America, Wilson said, “We must prove ourselves their friends and champions upon terms of equality and honor…whether it squares with our own interest or not.”

Wilson’s principles were tested by more turmoil in Latin America. In 1915, a revolt in Haiti prompted him to send marines to protect American lives and investments. It was not until 1934 that the United States withdrew its troops from Haiti. In 1916, Wilson sent troops to the Dominican Republic, where they stayed for 12 years.

Ironically, despite Wilson’s best intentions with his Moral Diplomacy and Self-Determination policies, Wilson actually intervened more than either Taft or Roosevelt.

Evaluate: Would your character agree, disagree, or partially agree with Wilson’s Moral Diplomacy? Self-Determination? How would your character respond to Wilson’s reactions concerning the events in Haiti? The Dominican Republic?

Resources: History Alive—Pursuing American Ideals