Henry Kissinger’s chapter “The Hinge” (from Diplomacy, 1994) might serve to highlight several considerations:

1. That the quest to define a “grand strategy” for the United States has a history—one that amply antedates the Cold War era. Ours is hardly the first effort to define US grand strategy in the context of dramatic, palpable fluidity in both the domestic and international environments.

2. That the Containment Doctrine is not the first or only instance of a successful American grand strategy. It may not even be the “most successful” such strategy. Or it may be a specific instance of a much larger and longer-lived grand strategy.

3. That much current discussion of this matter is historically conditioned in ways that may not be intuitively obvious. A historical perspective may drive some redefinition of the very concept of grand strategy.

To dilate:

1. The turn-of-the-century moment that Kissinger’s chapter chronicles suggests some interesting points of comparison with our own. Domestically, American society by 1900 exhibited the culminating consequences of powerfully transformative forces that had taken generations to do their work. Thanks in large measure to the enormous volume of immigration that swelled after the Civil War—nearly 25 million people immigrated to the United States over the four decades preceding World War I, or some 40 percent of the world’s total trans-national migration at the time (compared with about 18 percent today)—by 1900 the United States was the most populous country in the western world, save only Russia. And thanks to the prodigious maturation of America’s own industrial revolution over the course of the nineteenth century, the United States by 1900 also boasted the world’s largest rail network and electrical grid, and was the leading producer of
wheat, coal, iron, and steel. It began posting surpluses on its international trade account in the 1890s, soon became a net creditor for the first time in its history, and by 1914 held the world’s largest pool of investment capital.

In short, the United States had now acquired the demographic, material, and financial capacity, though not yet the will—nor, arguably, even the interests—to radically revise the regnant foreign policy doctrines that had held sway for more than a century.

Americans of that day also confronted a remarkably dynamic and novel international environment. The structures that had underwritten European peace for much of the nineteenth century were visibly crumbling. Technology now enabled the projection of national power on a scale and at distances previously unimaginable, touching off a frenzied round of colonization. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and Belgium engrossed enormous chunks of Southeast Asia and virtually all of Africa. Japan annexed Okinawa in 1879, Taiwan in 1895, and Korea in 1910. Even the United States, though born in a war against empire and still largely isolationist in its outlook, became an imperial power with the annexation of the Philippines and Puerto Rico at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Britain, meanwhile, the acknowledged global hegemon for much of the nineteenth century, faced not one but two rising challengers for that role: Germany and the United States. It twice made war on the first and eventually allied itself with the latter—foreign policy choices that might together constitute an interesting case study of a (British) grand strategy that failed on one front while succeeding on another.

The war against Spain in 1898 seemed to announce America’s debut on the stage of world affairs. As the celebrated French commentator André Tardieu put it in 1908, “Bismarck called the Monroe Doctrine ‘an international impertinence.’ Today, the impertinence would be in mistaking its scope. . . . [T]he United States is . . . a world power. . . . It is seated at the table where the great game is played, and it cannot leave it.”

That judgment was as yet premature. The Americans themselves continued to confound foreign observers in the early years of the twentieth century by their own indecision about just what kind of international role they wanted to play. Kissinger attributes this in large measure to the fact that America’s uniquely fortunate geography had nurtured what he regards as the “illusion” that the Americans could choose whether or not to participate in international affairs. But pace Kissinger, whose contempt for isolationism is evident, and who saw but a two-sided argument (Roosevelt vs. Wilson) in the opening years of the twentieth century, there were then in fact three choices: 1) to reaffirm historical isolationism; 2) to become a great power on the model of the other powers—the “realistic” course that Theodore Roosevelt urged and André Tardieu mistakenly believed was already
in train; or 3) to hearken to a new voice—Woodrow Wilson’s—that would soon summon them to an idealistic crusade to remake the world in the American mold.

Interestingly, those remain the principal poles around which current foreign policy debates continue to be oriented. Yet it is arguable that “Wilsonianism” eventually (to be precise, in the World War II moment) emerged the winner. It has constituted the lodestar and most deeply informing principle of American foreign policy since at least the declaration of the Atlantic Charter in 1941—through WWII and the Cold War, and through the Clinton, Bush, and Obama presidencies as well. Containment was merely one of its manifestations, or one of its tactics—and maybe only a holding tactic at that—in service of the larger goal of restructuring the entirety of the international environment.¹

II. Isolationism, the position that Kissinger largely ignores, has acquired a bad reputation over the last few generations, not least because the “Wise Men” who were the principal architects of post-WWII Wilsonianism believed it had to be aggressively repudiated if they were to achieve their internationalist goals. But the energy with which they felt obliged to go about stigmatizing and delegitimizing historical isolationism testifies loudly to its weight and staying power in American political culture—even today. Isolationism was, arguably, the most long-lived and successful grand strategy that the United States has embraced in the nation’s more than two centuries of existence. Revisiting it with unblinking and unbiased eyes may help guide the present discussion.

From George Washington’s Farewell Address to Thomas Jefferson’s declaration in his first inaugural that he sought “peace, commerce, and friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none,” to John Quincy Adams’s proclamation in 1821 that America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” through the Monroe Doctrine in 1823—in many ways the truly signature statement of isolationism’s fundamental tenets—and well beyond, isolation was long the foundational principle of American foreign policy. Isolationism’s strength as an operational doctrine appeared even as the likes of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge tried to redefine and reorient American diplomacy at century’s end. What they called their “Large Policy” rested on three pillars: In the Americas, domination; in Asia, cooperation; and with regards to Europe, isolation.

To be sure, isolation represented the most obvious strategic choice for a relatively small, weak state, and one that leveraged the peculiarities of its uniquely insular geography. But as the Monroe Doctrine made clear, isolationism was a two-part doctrine. It included: 1) a policy of American detachment from global affairs, especially European affairs; and 2) a no less strenuous policy of keeping other powers—again, especially European powers—from playing a role in the Americas.
It’s important to note that both parts of the doctrine served another cherished American goal, then and later—what the historian C. Vann Woodward many years ago labeled “free security.” Free security embraced and leveraged America’s isolated geography to underwrite a policy of minimal expenditure on traditional means of asserting the national will. That economizing goal remained prominent in the carefully calibrated way that the United States engaged in both world wars, and after 1945 in the embrace of first nuclear and then technological superiority as the least expensive means to achieve national security.

For writers like Walter Russell Mead, the success of isolation as a paramount strategic principle is axiomatic. For more than a century the United States effectively safeguarded its national sovereignty (the first and essential requirement of any nation’s foreign policy), with minimum human and fiscal expense, and thereby positioned itself to become the dominant international actor of the modern era. In that perspective, isolationism appears as not merely the predecessor of American internationalism, but its necessary predicate. As Mead puts it: “The rise of American power has been consistent, striking, sustained over the long term, and accomplished at an astonishingly low cost [by] the world’s most successful country.”

It should be noted, as Kissinger also points out, that even the most expansionary war of the nineteenth century, against Mexico, had an isolationist/free security logic, rooted in the second side of the Monroe Doctrine as described above. As President James K. Polk explained, the annexation of Texas, which lit the fuse that sparked the Mexican War, was necessary to prevent Texas from becoming “an ally or dependency of some foreign nation more powerful than herself.” Even the Civil War conforms at least in part to the logic of the isolationist/free security doctrine, as evidenced in Lincoln’s remark that among the most dreaded outcomes of successful secession would be the fragmentation of the continent from Hudson’s Bay to the isthmus of Tehuantepec into a seething snake-pit of rivalrous and contentious states, all potentially susceptible to foreign intervention or manipulation—a situation that would compel all to adopt and maintain costly, large-scale military establishments like those in Europe.

Isolationism, in sum, deserves to be recognized as something much more consequential and interesting than the kind of irresponsible, parochial, xenophobic, and ignorant dogma that it is frequently characterized as being. Considered comprehensively, isolationism meets virtually all the tests of what we mean by “grand strategy.”

On close examination, in the nineteenth century at least, isolationism is seen to have defined a well-articulated set of policies that shrewdly acknowledged and utilized some distinguishing characteristics of America’s geopolitical circumstance, accurately read the possible threats in the international environment, commanded
deep popular assent, cogently integrated foreign and domestic policies, could on occasion (Mexican War, Civil War) sanction the use of substantial military force, and, most importantly, succeeded notably in its highest objectives of securing the largest feasible national domain at minimum cost.

III. Now to return to that “hinge” moment that Kissinger describes. Yes, the triumph of Wilsonianism was delayed for a generation, and isolationism reasserted itself with some grotesque consequences in the inter-war period, as its classic nineteenth-century version proved woefully inappropriate to the circumstances of the new century. But nonetheless, it seems clear in hindsight that the basic vocabulary and grammar of American internationalism were pretty well hammered out in the two-decade or so period on which Kissinger focuses.

The most notable feature of that emerging conceptual framework, I’d like to suggest, lay in a new definition of American foreign policy goals, driven in turn by a new sense of the relation of means (or capacity) to ends (or objectives). Here are the seeds of the notion that transforming the international environment is the highest and best goal of American foreign policy—an idea so prevalent and pervasive that it is central to the Krasner/Zegart definition of a “successful grand strategy” as circulated within this working group on June 21, 2013, where they say that a “vision” of “shaping international regimes and organizations . . .” is a necessary component of any policy that aspires to be recognized as “grand strategy.”

A similarly broad conception inhabits Daniel Drezner’s flippant dismissal of the idea that Belgium could even entertain the idea of a grand strategy, since it patently lacks capacity to transform the world order. “The rest of the world is not waiting up nights to learn about Belgium’s grand strategy (although a government would be nice),” he somewhat snarkily observes. But the rest of the world’s inattention surely does not mean that Belgium does not or should not have its own sense of its national priorities and its place in the international system, and seek the appropriate means to square the two. What is that calculation if not a grand strategy? So although not all grand strategies are equal, every coherent and self-respecting country is obliged to have one.

Which leads to the question: how did the Wilsonian aspiration to transform the world assume such paramountcy in American foreign policy and national security doctrine? How has that aspiration compromised the common-sense precept that sharp calculations of costs should be weighed up alongside every benefit alleged to flow from any foreign policy initiative? And what can be learned from the observation that Woodrow Wilson forged such an extravagantly global agenda in that heady moment a century ago when the United States awakened to the scale and reach of its potential power?
Those questions in turn lead to a final reflection about the ways that power does not merely permit but actually defines foreign policy objectives. As the United States acquired more power, it simultaneously acquired what Robert Kagan has described as an “expanding sense of both interests and entitlement.” What’s more, Kagan adds, “as perceived interests expanded, so did perceived threats and the perceived need for even more power to address them.”

As the nation grew more powerful, its dreams became desires; desires became necessities; necessities became imperatives; and imperatives led to the drive for hegemony or even empire. Power, in short, constitutes its own self-feeding perpetual-motion machine that has relentlessly driven America’s international behavior for the better part of the past century. And when a nation arrives at the point in its history when it believes itself to possess unmatchable power and harbors no doubts about the scope of its interests or the rightness of its cause—when it represents an “armed doctrine,” cocksure and implacable, as Edmund Burke characterized the forces unleashed by the French Revolution—what dangers does it court for itself, as well as for others?

Notes


The certainties of the Cold War, such as they were, have disappeared. The United States now confronts several historically unique challenges, including the rise of a potential peer competitor, a rate of technological change unseen since the 19th century, the proliferation of nuclear and biological capabilities, and the possible joining of these capabilities with transnational terrorist movements. There has been no consensus on a grand strategy or even a set of principles to address specific problems. Reactive and ad hoc measures are not adequate.

The Hoover Institution’s Foreign Policy Working Group will explore an array of foreign policy topics over a two-year period. Our goal is to develop orienting principles about the most important policy challenges to better serve America’s interests.

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