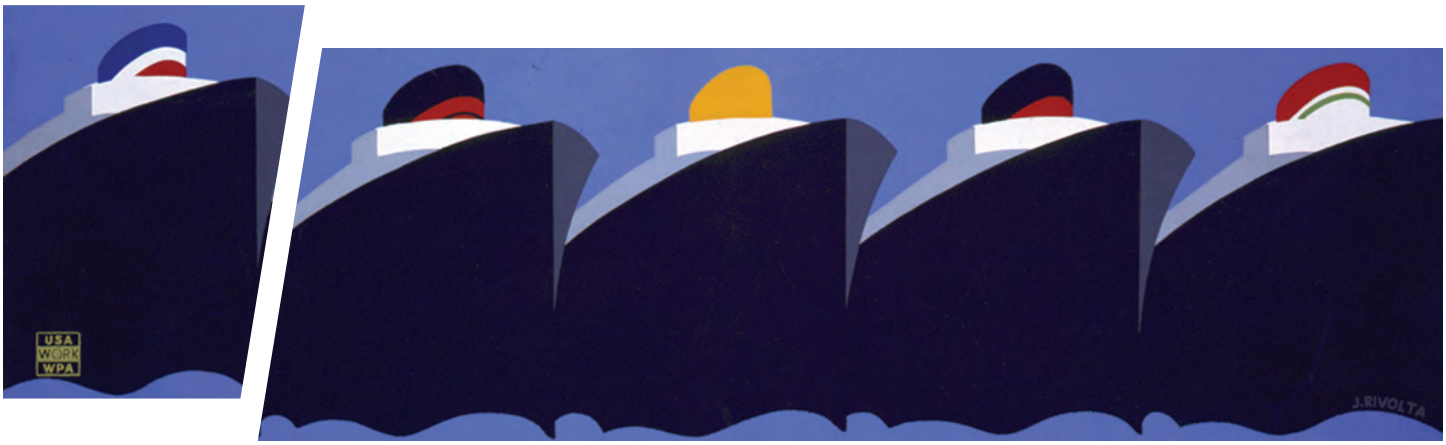
ISOLATING AMERICA

Wendy N. Whitman Cobb • Images, Library of Congress



Recently I took some of my students to a Model United Nations conference. Over three to four days, students take on the roles of U.N. representatives and attempt to work through some of the world's most intractable problems. They work 18-hour days, forgo meals, negotiate, and placate. They write resolutions addressing topics such as the use of unmanned drones, cyberattacks, human rights, and the fight against HIV/AIDS. In Security Council simulations they argue about sanctions and peacekeeping operations. All the while we, their faculty advisors, must sit back and watch our students run the world.

Believe it or not, the students are actually quite successful, coming up with unique solutions that bring a majority of countries on board. In any given session, one can see Israel and Iran, or Pakistan and India negotiating agreements. Even though vetoes might be threatened or some resolutions voted down, these students demonstrate the successes that diplomacy might have if only given the chance.

Admittedly, Model U.N. simulations are not carbon copies of the world as we know it. Most of the students (at least in regional conferences) are Americans and have little conception of what it's like to live and grow up in an impoverished country. They do not face the same pressures that U.N. diplomats are under from their home governments. Their lives do not depend on success or lack of it.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF WITHDRAWING FROM THE WORLD STAGE

The United Nations is but one example of how the United States is intricately involved in world affairs. Not only is the U.N. headquartered in New York, but the United States holds one of five vetoes on the Security Council and contributes twenty-two percent of the U.N. annual budget. U.S. involvement in the U.N. is a microcosm of U.S. involvement with the rest of the world: a whole lot of politics and a little bit of action. Critics are apprehensive about the U.S. funding the United Nations at such a high level when it receives little benefit and other countries do not contribute money in similar proportion. In fact, the United States has gone so far as to withhold its dues in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a response to UNESCO's decision to allow Palestine to become a Member State in the agency.

The controversy over U.S. actions in the U.N. and abroad is not a new one. From the beginning of America's history, prominent leaders have cautioned against getting too involved in world affairs. Although his Farewell Address is more often remembered for its caution against party politics, George Washington also warned against extensive relations with the rest of the world: "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible." Washington's warning would always be difficult to abide by, evidenced within years by another war with England in 1812 and James Monroe's declaration in 1823

that the U.S. would intervene in any further European attempts to colonize the Western Hemisphere.

The rhetoric of isolationism would always seem greater than America's commitment to it; and yet we find modern politicians arguing that America should recede from world affairs. *What if* American leaders implemented a full policy of isolationism? What consequences would emerge? What effects would everyday Americans feel?

Defining Isolationism

Isolationism is a foreign policy directed to limiting interactions with the rest of the world, primarily in two policy areas: military/diplomatic relations and economics. While nearly always invoking military withdrawal, variability comes in the area of economics. It can be viewed along a continuum—extreme to "light"—depending on the degree of cooperation with the world at large.

In the most extreme version, the United States would bring home military troops stationed abroad, retire from world organizations such as the United Nations and NATO, reduce our diplomatic presence across the world (if not outright recalling ambassadors from their posts), end trade agreements, and shut down ports to international commerce. Needless to say, this type of isolationism would not only be dangerous to undertake but almost impossible to implement.

On the other end of the spectrum, isolationism "light" would withdraw the United States from diplomatic and military world affairs while remaining involved economically: troops would be recalled and treaties abandoned, but relationships that the U.S. and global economies rely on would be generally preserved.

We can also envision a third isolationism option (falling between these "extreme" and "light" versions) that combines military and diplomatic withdrawal with *some* economic retraction. This idea would be subjective and difficult to craft, to consider *how much* to pull back. Would it expand industrial manufacturing here at home and encourage exports but not imports? How connected would we be with global markets? Would we continue to be a part of free trade agreements such as NAFTA?

The answers to these questions come from isolationists themselves. Those who support isolationism argue from one or both of the following principles: economic protectionism (expanding industry and the home economy while limiting trade relations with the outside world) and non-interventionism (avoiding entanglements in the affairs of other countries). Both of these principles stem from the essential fear that if a country finds itself involved with other countries, its destiny and history will not be of its own making, but at the whims and desires of others.

W.P.A. Federal Art Project poster, Jack Riviolta, 1937

The Upside

For the purposes of our exercise, suppose that in the near future American politicians support middle-ground isolationism, whereby America withdraws militarily but continues limited economic engagement. The easiest results to imagine are those in the diplomatic and military sphere: reducing the amount of money the U.S. spends on defense would free it up for other purposes. According to National Priorities Project, in 2015 the U.S. will spend $609 billion on the military; while this is less than the categories of Medicare and health-related spending ($1 trillion) and Social Security and unemployment ($1.28 trillion), it is still far more than other areas, including interest on the debt ($229 billion), veterans' benefits ($160 billion), and education ($102 billion).

Imagine what we could do with nearly a trillion dollars in re-appropriated funding: bridges and roads could be repaired, airports and infrastructure projects could be completed, education spending could be doubled. We could also pay down U.S. debt to other countries, significantly aiding isolationists in the pursuit of economic disentanglement from the world.

But what are the costs of such drastic moves, ending all U.S. military operations and recalling thousands of troops currently stationed overseas? Isolationists see only opportunity: our involvement in the conflicts of Afghanistan and Iraq would finally be over, expensive bases overseas would be eliminated, and American troops and their families would no longer endure painful separations. Strategic interests abroad would be better protected because we no longer antagonize countries with the placement of troops and weaponry in contested areas. Savings would also be realized by ending diplomatic missions, eliminating the need for ambassadors or funds to maintain and protect compounds in dangerous areas like Pakistan, Iraq, or Libya. These moves would drastically reduce the size and scope of the U.S. government, including the Department of Defense and the Department of State, two of the oldest bureaucracies in America.

To this point, implementing middle-ground isolationism seems rather easy and cost effective; prescriptions in military and diplomatic policy are easily understood and attained. It is in the *economic realm* where plans become more difficult. How much economic involvement with the rest of the world can U.S. isolationists stomach? In a middle-ground approach, lawmakers would adopt economic protectionism policies that encourage industry at home (via tax incentives or grants and loans) and punish industry abroad (with high tariffs that dissuade consumers from buying imported goods, perhaps placing them completely out of reach).

America would have to seriously rethink its relationship with the world banking industry. Almost certainly we would have to stop borrowing money from abroad and suspend direct foreign investment. If combined with savings from reduced military spending, such a strategy might be possible. If we applied the entire savings from defense, essentially $600 billion, we could just about pay off debt owed to China, which in 2014 stood at $1.27 trillion. Theoretically, with a booming economy at home, federal tax income would rise, allowing all debt to be paid off in due course.

On the Other Hand . . .

This depiction of isolationism is not all flowers and rainbows. In addition to the 1.3 million active duty troops currently employed by the United States, the Defense Department employs 3 million Americans and the State Department 18,000. If we reduced their numbers by 75 percent, we would suddenly find 2.26 million

A recurring theme of isolationism spans U.S. history. LEFT Following WWI, the overwhelming American sentiment was to reduce arms and find alternatives to war for settling international disputes. The National Council for Prevention of War (NCPW) distributed information and transported carloads of advocates to rally for peace at political party conventions. Shown here, Goldie Dunn and Louise Hiatt with posters stating: "Isolation will not Stop War, Cooperation will Stop War" (July 13, 1924). RIGHT Eight hundred protestors from Women Strike for Peace hold a demonstration near the U.N. building in New York City, calling for peace during the Cuban missile crisis (photo by Phil Stanziola, 1962).

Americans out of work. For comparison, currently 10.3 million Americans are unemployed. But it is not just unemployment that would take a hit. Military bases here and across the globe serve as economic boosts, bringing people, employment, and industry to often out-of-the-way places. The loss of such bases would impact Americans around the world.

Other U.S. strategic interests could also be harmed were we to suddenly disappear from the global scene. We might imagine the Islamic State (also known as ISIS and ISIL), in concert with other terrorist groups like Boko Haram, taking over significant territory in the Middle East and Africa. Given safe harbors from which to operate, terrorist actions against the U.S. or other countries might not be far behind.

There is also diplomatic damage to be considered. Historic allies such as France and the United Kingdom would no longer see the U.S. as a reliable partner. European countries might pursue different courses in their own foreign policies, such as obtaining nuclear weapons. An arms race could ensue, putting the global balance of power dangerously in peril—and that's just in Europe.

Isolationism also has dangers economically. Upon announcing such a policy, it is likely that China and other holders of U.S. debt would call it in, causing great harm to U.S. monetary policy. Isolationism requires investment in the economy at home; to see the catch-22, one need only visit a Wal-Mart and examine where products are made to know that a significant percentage of consumer goods are not made in the U.S.A.

Access to natural resources would also be restricted. While natural gas and oil are the most obvious imports on which we rely, minerals such as silver, iron, gold, uranium, and lithium would also be hard to come by with few natural mines within U.S. territories.

Is It Possible?

While many politicians and voters claim to want to return to isolationism, the downsides of enacting such a policy would be all-encompassing and formidable at best. Commentators have extolled its virtues through the twentieth century, but the reality is that America has never been truly isolationist. From the Barbary Wars in the early 1800s to the Spanish-American War and Philippine-American War at the turn of the twentieth century, and American involvement in various South American conflicts, the United States has always been *internationalist* at heart.

This internationalism has led to American involvement in conflicts as recent as Iraq and Afghanistan under the banner of promoting American ideals, ideals that have varied throughout American history. At the end of the day, America has balanced interventionism with a focus on conditions at home; in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, the reemergence of an isolationist stream in American politics is a typical American reaction to typical American actions.

WENDY N. WHITMAN COBB received her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Florida. She teaches political science at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, and is author of the recent book *Unbroken Government: Success and the Illusion of Failure in Policymaking* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

EXTRA! | READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "Global Challenges and U.S. National Security Strategy," Henry A. Kissinger, statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Jan. 29, 2015. Notes that in the changing world order, the U.S. is positioned to "shape international affairs." Kissinger further states: "The consequence of American disengagement is greater turmoil." csis.org
- "Empire?" Global Policy Forum. Articles analyze how the U.S. has historically used economic, political, and military power in global relations. globalpolicy.org/empire