

United States, but a war started by President James Polk in support of territorial expansion. Such unattractive points of fact are commonly glossed over in the upbringing and education of most Americans at home, in school, and throughout society. Therefore, much popular folklore and “myth” is accepted by Americans as fact and history.⁶¹ This also helps to reinforce a general attitude that American politics is, and should be, “cleaner” and less “political” than politics in other countries. This also makes it difficult for Americans to tolerate and accept historical facts or patterns that are inconsistent with their optimistic images. Such simplistic and optimistic images, in other words, make it easy for Americans to ignore history and politics, thus reinforcing low levels of attention and information in public opinion.

Second, America’s national style is responsible for the moralization of U.S. foreign policy. The moralization of foreign policy has colored and affected U.S. foreign policy in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, American leaders have often embodied a nationalist and idealist yearning that has turned much of U.S. foreign policy into the equivalent of a moral crusade. This has been a major pattern throughout the twentieth century: Woodrow Wilson led the United States in World War I to “end all wars” and promote self-determination throughout the world; American cold war policies represented freedom against the forces of tyranny; President Carter’s post-cold war foreign policy revolved around the promotion of human rights and democracy; and President Reagan’s reinstatement of the cold war was an effort to restore American greatness and battle the “evil empire.” Although overstated, sociologist Robert Nisbet argues that, “the single most powerful cause of the present size and the worldwide deployment of the military establishment is the moralization of foreign policy and military ventures that has been deeply ingrained, especially in the minds of presidents, for a long time.”⁶²

On the other hand, not only has this moralization often exaggerated foreign policy goals, activities, and expectations, it also has meant that much of U.S. foreign policy has had to remain hidden and disguised from the public. The actual conduct of U.S. foreign policy often involves the pragmatic pursuit of national interests heavily informed by a national security ethos that existed before, and will continue to exist after, the cold war. This means that policymakers engage in secrecy, bargaining, rewards, threats, force, and all of the other instruments associated with “power politics” in order to successfully promote their national interests as they define them. But such amoral and pragmatic behavior, as we discussed in chapter 6 on covert operations, is not consistent with notions of American innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism. This explains why the realpolitik foreign policy promoted by Henry Kissinger under Presidents Nixon and Ford was never well received by Americans—it was too “amoral” in nature. This also helps to explain why the economic and geopolitical explanations that President Bush relied on early in the Persian Gulf crisis had difficulty convincing Americans that the American strategy of taking Iraq to the brink of war to force it out of Kuwait was sensible, at least before war broke out. The unwillingness by Americans to recognize, and deal with, the contradictions between morality and pragmatism in foreign policy has been a topic of concern for quite some time by such thinkers as George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and Reinhold Niebuhr.⁶³ Failing

to address these contradictions also downplays and increases the tension between the demands of national security and the demands of democracy.

Third, American leaders usually have to sell their policies to the public by simplifying them and infusing them with moral purpose in the process, further reinforcing American culture and nationalism. It matters little whether political leaders themselves share these same cultural and nationalistic values—most do, some do not. The fact is that the pragmatic majority is generally uninterested and uninformed about world affairs, and so political overstatement and oversell is deemed necessary to attract public attention and support, especially when foreign policy changes or the use of force is involved. This compels leaders to rely on the “politics of symbolism,” which will be discussed to a greater extent in chapter 15. To arouse public support, political leaders link issues to moral symbols and values with which most Americans identify. As Senator Arthur Vandenburg told senior officials of the Truman administration, the only way to get Congress and the public to support military assistance to Greece and Turkey in 1947, to overcome post-World War II isolationist tendencies, was to “scare the hell out of the American people” about the threat of communism to freedom, democracy, and the American way of life. Such was the language of the Truman Doctrine.⁶⁴ This helps to explain the power of anticommunism in the making of foreign policy since World War II. This also helps to explain why Americans were told that the Grenadian invasion was for the humanitarian purpose of rescuing American students, and that the Panama invasion was designed to help the Panamanian people by ridding them of the evil Noriega. Realpolitik and political reasons were mentioned only briefly or ignored entirely, for President Reagan was trying to rally public support. This also helps one to understand why President Bush increasingly began to equate Saddam Hussein of Iraq with Adolf Hitler of Nazi Germany as the Persian Gulf crisis escalated.

Fourth, the moralization and the tendency to oversell foreign policy often breeds strong doses of American nationalism and intolerance abroad and at home. Nationalism is often a positive force, for it helps to promote a strong sense of community among members of society in support of a common effort—an essential quality in times of both war and peace. One of the major problems with a strong sense of nationalism, however, is that patriotism often turns into intolerance and “superpatriotism.” Such attitudes have the tendency to dehumanize adversaries and repress domestic criticism and dissent in the name of national security. Intolerance is particularly evident during periods of national emergency and war, when people feel threats to their values and to their country’s security. Thus, strong doses of nationalism heighten the contradictions between the demands of national security and democracy at home, a topic that will be discussed in some depth in chapter 14 on the exercise of civil liberties. This has also made it difficult for Americans to accept criticism from abroad, including from the country’s closest allies, thus reflecting deep-seated isolationist and unilateralist sentiments. Americans have such a strong faith in American virtue and progress that it is difficult for them to understand, let alone accept, the value of alternative paths to economic and political development divorced from the American model.

A final consequence of American culture and nationalism is their tendency