From the creation of the new nation, the United States has always been involved in world affairs. However, it generally followed Washington’s maxim in his Farewell Address to observe good faith and justice towards all nations but to avoid “permanent alliances” with any particular nation. Nevertheless, at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States took its first steps down an imperial path, annexing Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. By 1917, it had intervened in a global war begun by distant European powers and proposed an international league to keep the peace. The creation of empire and intervention into European and global affairs marked an important change from the American Founding and led to a new direction in American foreign policy.

The United States had been involved in the world throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most important way was as a trade partner. The United States expanded its trade with the globe and opened up nations such as Japan to trade. The United States nearly went to war in the 1790s and early 1800s due to other countries’ violating its right of free trade, and the nation did go to war with Great Britain to protect that right in the War of 1812. The United States also went to war with Mexico in 1846 over the disputed annexation of Texas and acquired several western territories. Moreover, the United States had acquired land through treaties such as the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Oregon Treaty in 1846, and Alaska in 1867. In 1823, the United States announced the Monroe Doctrine which asserted that the Europeans were banned from intervening in the western hemisphere and that the United States would not interfere in European affairs.

By the 1890s, America’s western frontier had been largely settled and there was no longer space for new expansion in North America. At the same time, high rates of immigration, a struggling economy reeling from the Panic of 1893, and diminished confidence in political leaders combined to create a widespread sense of national unease. Americans also worried that the nation would fall behind more powerful imperial nations like Britain and Germany, who were engaged in a struggle for colonies around the world for economic benefit, nationalism, and strategic advantage. Over time, Americans became more supportive of an increased role in international affairs and began to look outside the continent for new economic opportunities.

As the 1890s wore on, Americans became increasingly concerned by the Cuban rebellion and the atrocities committed against Cubans by the Spanish military. Newspapers bemoaned the plight of the impoverished Cuban people and published sometimes exaggerated tales of cruelty in order to exhort the American government to intervene on the Cubans’ behalf. Americans came to support an American military intervention on the island and war against...
Spain. While yellow journalism (sensationalist news reporting) did influence Americans’ views on foreign policy especially with its coverage of the explosion of the *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana Harbor, it was not the only factor which pushed them towards war. There were two primary thoughts about America’s role in the world among Americans in the 1890s. The first centered on feelings of humanitarianism and sympathy, held by a loose affiliation of populists, utopians, Christian social gospel reformers, and socialists of different motivations. The second predominant national mentality focused on a desire to enhance the power of the United States on the world stage. This group of Americans, inspired by the example of the British Empire and the writings of naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, supported a more aggressive assertion of American military might in world geopolitics and believed that the U.S. needed to expand its territorial holdings abroad in order to ensure its economic and military security.

In February, 1898, war fever gripped Americans when the U.S.S. Maine exploded in Havana Harbor and led to cries for war with Spain. In April, Congress declared that a state of war existed between Spain and the United States. In a swift military campaign, the American army easily overpowered Spanish forces in Cuba in actions including a charge up San Juan Hill by Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders. Meanwhile the U.S. Navy destroyed the Spanish fleet at Manila Bay in the Philippines. The Americans quickly occupied Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. The Spanish agreed to a peace settlement in August, ceding control of these regions to the United States, and effectively ending Spain’s formerly huge and powerful empire.

In 1898, Congress passed the Teller Amendment, which forbade the U.S. from annexing Cuba as a new territory. By 1901, the U.S. government reversed itself by passing the Platt Amendment, which allowed the United States to control the treaty-making ability of Cuba, permitted the United States to intervene in Cuba to preserve its independence, and granted the United States a coaling station, which became the Guantanamo Bay naval base. Following the Venezuelan Crisis of 1902-1903, in which British, German, and Italian fleets bombarded and blockaded Venezuelan ports for failure to pay debts, President Theodore Roosevelt issued what became known as the Roosevelt Corollary. The Corollary asserted that the U.S. would intervene militarily in the affairs of Latin American states if they had violated the rights of the United States or European powers—European states had no right to intervene in Latin American affairs without American approval or arbitration. Throughout the twentieth century, Roosevelt and his successors used this policy to justify new interventions in Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, Honduras, Haiti, and other Caribbean nations.

Regarding the Pacific, many of the nation’s political leaders believed that the annexation of the former Spanish colony of the Philippines was a worthwhile endeavor. They asserted that assuming permanent control of the Philippines would provide the U.S. easier access to Asian markets and would become a suitable naval base. Many advocates of annexation argued that the U.S. had a moral obligation to evangelize and civilize Filipinos, many of whom were already Roman Catholic, and to provide stable government for them.

A group of important Americans opposed to the annexation of the Philippines formed the American Anti-Imperialist League. The League’s mission was championed by a diverse array of leaders, including former president Grover Cleveland, industrialist Andrew Carnegie, union
leader Samuel Gompers, and intellectual Charles Francis Adams, Jr. They and their supporters argued that any annexation of foreign lands violated the traditional American principle of government by consent. They also warned against the financial costs of empire-building and the complications which arise from imperial competition with other powerful nations.

In December, 1898, President McKinley ordered the army to occupy all of the Philippines. Within months, Filipinos, who had been eager to overthrow Spanish control of their country, rose in rebellion against the U.S. Army, inaugurating more than three years of vicious fighting with atrocities on both sides. Though most Filipino forces surrendered by the summer of 1902, the guerrilla war continued through 1913. Thousands of Americans and Filipinos died in the fighting, and the Philippines did not gain its independence until after World War II.

The Spanish-American War had been a turning point in American foreign policy because for the first time the nation went to war ostensibly to safeguard the liberty of a foreign nation. This mission was in line with the evolving progressive view of foreign policy which held that America ought to intervene in the affairs of other nations in order to civilize and rebuild their society on an American model. Progressives believed that American imperialism was more benevolent than European styles of imperialism, which progressives viewed as exploitative and damaging to their colonial subjects. The progressives believed in Social Darwinism and a racial hierarchy of peoples around the world. Some Americans thought they had a responsibility to “educate” the supposedly racially inferior peoples of the world to govern themselves democratically.

Under President Theodore Roosevelt, the government adopted an increasingly expansionary foreign policy based upon military strength. He believed that America should “speak softly and carry a big stick,” to exercise American strength around the globe. Under Roosevelt, the Navy underwent major expansion and modernization. From 1907 to 1909, the Navy demonstrated its new power as the Great White Fleet of battleships steamed across the globe and visited foreign ports as a friendly warning that the United States could compete militarily with Europe. In 1903 Roosevelt aided the Panamanian secession from Columbia, guaranteeing the United States’ acquisition of the Panama Canal, which would be opened in 1914, and protected American national security and trade in both the Atlantic and the Pacific.

President Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy continued Roosevelt’s policy of intervention in Latin America and was also influenced by Social Darwinism in his first major foreign policy problem in Mexico. However, Wilson’s foreign policy had a moralistic bent rather than Roosevelt’s assertive use of American power. In 1911, moderate revolutionary Francisco Madero overthrew the oppressive, unequal regime of Mexican President Porfirio Diaz. In 1913, when General Victoriano Huerta deposed and murdered Madero, Wilson opposed the military takeover and refused to recognize Huerta’s government. Wilson even threatened to intervene in Mexico and overthrow Huerta, massing thousands of troops on the border and sending warships to the port of Veracruz. When some American sailors were arrested ashore in Tampico and released, the naval commander and President Wilson disdainfully demanded a twenty-one gun salute to the American flag. Huerta refused, and Wilson sent seven battleships and Marines that resulted in fighting and 150 deaths for both sides. Venustiano Carranza replaced Huerta with Wilson’s support and recognition of the
new government. Beginning in early 1916, bandit Pancho Villa challenged both Carranza and Wilson when he stirred up trouble on the border when he raided American soil and killed Americans. Wilson sent troops to combat Villa, but they were soon withdrawn to fight in Europe.

When World War I began in the summer of 1914, President Woodrow Wilson asked Americans to be “neutral in thought as well as in deed.” America remained neutral during the initial years of the conflict, and many Americans strongly opposed intervention. However, Wilson also asserted American neutral rights to trade with both sides, which benefitted Great Britain and her allies more than Germany. As the war continued, German submarines sank several American merchant ships. Wilson viewed these attacks as outrageous violations of international law and the rights of neutral nations. Still, Wilson pursued a policy of restraint and campaigned during the presidential election of 1916 on the slogan that he had “kept us out of war.”

In January, 1917, Germany adopted a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare to sink all neutral vessels on sight, and pressure grew in the United States to intervene and end the “Great War”. In March 1917, the British intercepted and shared the Zimmermann Telegram, in which the Germans offered a military alliance to Mexico, in exchange for Mexican intervention against the United States. In April, Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany. In his speech, Wilson argued—in accordance with progressive views on foreign policy—that it was America’s duty to “make the world safe for democracy” and to combat autocratic nations such as Germany. Congress duly declared war. By the time World War I ended in November 1918 with the defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary, 117,000 Americans had been killed.

With the armistice of 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson attempted not only to end this war but also to build a new progressive world order that would assure a just and lasting peace, ending war for all time. Wilson helped create the League of Nations, an international organization similar to the modern United Nations, to keep the peace by agreeing to join forces against any aggressor nation. The League Covenant was included as a provision of the Treaty of Versailles, which was taken up for consideration by the Senate in 1919. Senators balked at Article X of the League Covenant, which required member nations to go to war against an aggressor. The Republican Senators, led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, believed Article X violated the American Constitution which provided that only Congress could declare war for the United States. These senators maintained that the Treaty of Versailles violated American national sovereignty by allowing an international body to control when the United States would go to war. The Senate voted on the treaty on Nov. 19, 1919, and again on March 19, 1920, both times falling short of the two-thirds majority necessary for ratification. Wilson refused to compromise with the Senate and remove Article X, which would have persuaded the Senate to ratify the treaty. Consequently, the United States never joined the League of Nations.

During the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States had transformed its foreign policy and moved away from the relative non-interventionism that guided the early American republic before the Civil War. The United States became an imperial global power guided by its ideals to advance democracy around the globe. However, the United States changed from being an example for the world to actively intervening to promote democracy even through war.
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What were the constitutional principles that guided early American foreign policy before World War I? What was the character of American involvement with the world prior to the twentieth century?

2. How did the Spanish-American War alter American involvement with the rest of the world?

3. What ideals motivated President Theodore Roosevelt’s foreign policy?

4. Why did Woodrow Wilson intervene in Mexico?

5. What events and ideals motivated President Woodrow Wilson and Congress’ decision to enter World War I?

6. Why did the Senate vote against the Versailles Treaty and American participation in the League of Nations? What constitutional arguments did many senators use to justify their opposition?