

John Lewis Gaddis, "What Did the Americans Want?", *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005)

WHAT DID the Americans want after the war? Unquestionably also security, but in contrast to Stalin, they were much less certain of what they would have to do to obtain it. The reason had to do with the dilemma World War II had posed for them: that the United States could not continue to serve as a model for the rest of the world while remaining apart from the rest of the world.

Throughout most of their history Americans had tried to do just this. They had not had to worry much about security because oceans separated them from all other states that might conceivably do them harm. Their very independence from Great Britain resulted, as Thomas Paine had predicted it would in 1776, from the implausibility that "a Continent [could] be perpetually governed by an island."¹² Despite their naval superiority, the British were never able to project sufficient military power across some 3,000 miles of water to keep the Americans within the empire, or to prevent them from dominating the North American continent. The prospect that other Europeans might do so was even more remote, because successive governments in London came to agree with the Americans that there should be no further colonization in the western hemisphere. The United States enjoyed the luxury, therefore, of maintaining a vast sphere of influence without the risk that by doing so it would challenge the interests of any other great power.

The Americans did seek global influence in the realm of ideas: their declaration of Independence had, after all, advanced the radical claim that *all men* are created equal. But they made no effort, during their first fourteen decades of independence, to make good on that assertion. The United States would serve as an example; the rest of the world would have to decide how and under what circumstances to embrace it. "She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all," Secretary of State John Quincy Adams proclaimed in 1821, but "[s]he is the champion and vindicator only of her own."¹³ Despite an international ideology, therefore, American practices were isolationist: the nation had not yet concluded that its security required transplanting its principles. Its foreign and military policy was much less ambitious than one might have expected from a nation of such size and strength.

Only with World War I did the United States break out of this pattern. Worried that Imperial Germany might defeat Great Britain and France, Woodrow Wilson persuaded his countrymen that American military might was needed to restore the European balance of power— but even he justified this geopolitical objective in ideological terms. The world, he insisted, had to be made "safe for democracy,"¹⁴ Wilson went on to propose, as the basis for a peace settlement, a League of Nations that would impose on states something like the rule of law that states—at least enlightened ones—imposed on individuals. The idea that might alone makes right would, he hoped, disappear.

Both the vision and the restored balance, however, proved premature. Victory in World War I did not make the United States a global power; instead it confirmed, for most Americans, the dangers of overcommitment. Wilson's plans for a postwar collective security organization went well beyond where his countrymen were ready to go. Meanwhile, disillusionment with allies—together with Wilson's ill-conceived and half-hearted military intervention against the Bolsheviks in Siberia and North Russia in 1918-20—turned the fruits of victory sour. Conditions abroad encouraged a return to isolationism: the perceived inequities of the Versailles peace treaty, the onset of a global depression, and then the rise of aggressor states in Europe and East Asia all had the effect of convincing Americans that they would be better off avoiding international involvements altogether. It was a rare *withdrawal* of a powerful state from responsibilities beyond its borders.

After entering the White House in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt worked persistently—if often circuitously—to bring the United States into a more active role in world politics. It was not easy: "I feel very much as if I were groping for a door in a blank wall."¹⁵ Even after Japan had gone to war with China in 1937 and World War II had broken out in 1939, F.D.R. had made only minimal progress in persuading the nation that Wilson had been right: that its security could be threatened by what happened halfway around the world. It would take the shattering events of 1940-41—the fall of France, the battle of Britain, and ultimately the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—to bring about an American recommitment to the task of restoring a balance of beyond the western hemisphere. "We have profited by our past mistakes," the president promised in 1942. "This time we shall know how to make full use of victory."¹⁶

Roosevelt had four great wartime priorities. The first was to sustain allies—chiefly Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and (less successfully) Nationalist China—because there was no other way to achieve victory: the United States could not fight Germany and Japan alone. The second was to secure allied cooperation in shaping the postwar settlement, for without it there would be little prospect for lasting peace. The third had to do with the nature of that settlement. Roosevelt expected his allies to endorse one that would remove the most probable causes of future wars. That meant a new collective security organization with the power to deter and if necessary punish aggression, as well as a revived economic system equipped to prevent a new global depression. Finally, the settlement would have to be "sellable" to the American people: F.D.R. was not about to repeat Wilson's mistake of taking the nation beyond where it was prepared to go. There would be no reversion to isolationism, then, after World War II. But the United States not would not be prepared either—any more than the Soviet Union would be—to accept a postwar world that resembled its prewar predecessor.