DNL Lesson - The United States and the World since 1918 [CA 4.2]

• TS: If you need more help, you may have a look to Terminale ES/L lesson (in French).

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Introduction
Since 1918, the USA has been a major player in international relations.

The USA’s foreign policy can be best described as an equilibrium between pragmatism (Realpolitik or power politics: defending its own national interests) and idealism (believing in American exceptionalism, the USA has always justified its interventions abroad in the name of democracy, peace, and human rights).

1. The United States and the World: Power and Isolationism, 1918-45

1.1. A Traditional American Isolationism
   • "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" (George Washington’s Farewell
Before the first World War (1914-1918), though the USA was already the world’s most powerful economy since 1890, American public opinion was mostly isolationist, i.e. it wanted to ignore the World.

The main exception was the **Monroe Doctrine (1823)**: a US foreign policy that stated that efforts by European nations to colonize or interfere with states in North or South America would be viewed as acts of aggression, requiring U.S. intervention. The policy became deeply resented by Latin American nations for its overt interventionism and perceived U.S. imperialism.

### 1.2. The First World War (WWI) and the “New Diplomacy” (1917-19)
- **Timeline: US WWI Involvement**

Democrat Woodrow Wilson, was re-elected President of the USA in 1916 with the promise: "He kept us out of war".

On the 6th April 1917, the U.S.A. declared war on the German Empire. In July 1917, **General John J. Pershing** led the U.S. expeditionary force to France (two millions soldiers, 11th November 1918).

On the 8th January 1918, **Thomas Woodrow Wilson**, the President of the USA, gave a famous speech to the United States Congress in which he justified his country’s involvement in the First World War namely because violation of international law had been committed (German U-boot submarines had sunk ships in which there had been Americans, most famously the ocean liner Lusitania in May 1915). In these **Fourteen Points** [text] Wilson outlined his vision for a post-war world: he wanted reduction in arms, the self-determination of nations, and to create an association of nations to prevent future wars, i.e. a **League of Nations** (fr. Société des Nations, 1919-46). His ideas faced opposition at home and abroad, and the Treaty of Versailles was in fact never ratified by the United States Congress. The League of Nations was set up, but the USA did not become a member.

### 1.3. The Interbellum (1919-41): the Return to Isolationism

Republican Warren Harding is elected President in 1920 because he advocated **America First** and a “return to normalcy” (i.e. isolationism).

During the "Roaring Twenties" and the 30s, the payment of Allied WWI debts (UK, France...) to the US was a problem with staying power (especially as it was linked to the reparation payments by Germany to France, UK...).

The US continued to expand its business interests abroad throughout the
1920s, especially in Germany and South America (Foreign Direct Investment there went from about $150 million in 1910 to about $2,500 million in 1928).

The Johnson-Reed Act on immigration was passed in 1924 (repealed in 1965) and was aimed at restricting immigration of Southern Europeans, Eastern Europeans, and Jews, in addition to prohibiting the immigration of Arabs, East Asians, and Indians.

After the crisis that started with the October 1929 Wall Street Crash, America was in a sense too busy solving its domestic problems to worry about the rest of the world. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930 increased import tariffs on over 20,000 imported goods. This protectionism by the USA meant that trade with the rest of the world slowed considerably.

Totalitarianism was on the rise in Europe: communism (Lenin, 1917-1924; Joseph Stalin, 1924-1953), fascist Italy (Benito Mussolini, 1922-1945), national-socialist Germany (Adolf Hitler, 1933-1945). The Spanish Civil War was fought from 1936 to 1939 between the Republicans and the Nationalists (led by General Francisco Franco).

Between 1936 and 1937, U.S. Congress passed the Neutrality Acts to ensure that the US would not become entangled in foreign conflicts.
1.4. The United States and Second World War (WWII)

- If you need more help about WWII, you may have a look to this lesson (in French).
- Timeline: US WWII Involvement

1.4.1. The Lend-Lease and the Atlantic Charter (1941)

WWII started on the 1st September 1939 with the invasion of Poland by Germany. The USA was supplying arms and material to the Allied nations via the Lend-Lease program (initiated in March 1941). In August 1941, the USA had justified its potential involvement in the fighting in the Atlantic Charter (text drafted by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt).

1.4.2. A “Day of Infamy” (Dec. 1941)

It was essentially because of the surprise bombing by the Japanese of Pearl Harbor [map] (7th December 1941, 2,400 servicemen killed) that the USA decided to get involved in WWII. Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. on 11 December 1941, and the U.S. responded with a declaration of war.

The U.S. government ordered the internment in "War Relocation Camps" of over 110,000 people of Japanese heritage who lived on the U.S. Pacific coast.

1.4.3. The “Arsenal of Democracy”

The course of WWII was changed because of the U.S.A. capacity to produce massive amounts of arms (it was the “great arsenal of democracy”).

1.4.4. From Midway to Tokyo (1942-45)

Video Map: The War goes Global, June 1941 - end 1942
• In early June 1942, the Americans, achieved a decisive victory at Midway with their aircraft carriers over the Imperial Japanese Navy and defeated the Japanese army at Guadalcanal (1942-43).

• On 6 June 1944 (known as D-Day), the Western Allies invaded Normandy.

• On 12 April 1945, U.S. President Roosevelt died and was succeeded by Harry Truman.

• German Reich total and unconditional surrender was effective by the end of 8 May 1945.

• American forces moved towards Japan, taking Iwo Jima [map] by March 1945, and Okinawa by the end of June 1945.
Illustration 1: **Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima**, photograph taken on February 23, 1945, by Joe Rosenthal. It depicts five United States Marines and a United States Navy corpsman raising an American flag atop Mount Suribachi, during the Battle of Iwo Jima.
Illustration 2: The 1954 Marine Corps War Memorial, located adjacent to Arlington National Cemetery just outside Washington, D.C.

• The USA dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August 1945.

• On September 2, 1945, Japan surrendered, with the surrender documents signed aboard the deck of the American battleship USS Missouri in Tokyo bay [photogr.], ending WWII.

1.4.5. A Superpower in 1945

• At the Yalta Conference (February 1945) and the Potsdam Conference (July-August 1945), the USA, along with the UK and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), determined what the post-war world would be like.

• In an effort to maintain peace, the Allies formed the United Nations (October 1945). The great powers that were the victors of the war—the United States, Soviet Union, China, United Kingdom, and France—formed the permanent members (with veto power) of the UN's Security Council.
• By 1945, the USA had become a **superpower**:  
  - it manufactured ~50% of the world’s industrial production  
  - two-thirds of the world’s gold reserve was by then American  
  - until 1949, it was the only country with the **A-bomb**  
  - the U.S. dollar became the standard currency for the exchange rate (**Bretton Woods system, 1944**)  
  - its “American way of life” was serving as an political, economic, and cultural model.

2. **The Superpower in the Cold War, 1945-91**

2.1. **Two Worlds**

• With President Harry Truman's Message to Congress (**The Truman Doctrine**, about USSR **containment**) on March 12, 1947, followed by the **Marshall Plan** (officially the European Recovery Program, June 5, 1947) the **Cold War (1947-91)** with USSR started.
Reprinted in The Rotarian, October 1949

- Besotted, dazed: [fr. hébéité]
- Do a track-stand: [fr. faire du sur-place]
- Dozy: [fr. endormi à moitié]
- Dutch (the): the citizens of the Netherlands.
- Getting the hang of: [fr. attrapant le coup de main pour faire]
- Taxpayer: [fr. contribuable] people who pay a percentage of their income to the government as tax.
- Ruined: loss of wealth, position, etc.
- Sluggish: [fr. endormi, indolent]
- Waistcoat: [fr. gilet]
Illustration 3: Groucho Marx, film and television star [src]

Note: His distinctive appearance included quirks such as an exaggerated stooped posture, glasses, cigar, and a thick greasepaint mustache and eyebrows.

Illustration 4: Dutch sailors of the early 17th c. [src]
The author is presenting a critical view of the Marshall Plan (written on the flag on the bicycle). The friendly, older American taxpayer is encouraging a large, overweight and apparently drunken Europe on the road to Self Support.

A Ruined Europe

- During WWII, there was heavy bombing of Europe railways, factories, etc. => a starving (ex.: famine in Netherlands, Winter 1944) and ruined Europe.
- The Marshall Plan formed the greatest voluntary transfer of resources from one country to another known to history. Technically known as the European Recovery Program, the plan was passed by the U.S. Congress with a decisive majority and was signed by president Harry Truman on April 3, 1948.
- The plan furnished money, food, fuel, and machinery at a time when the Western European economies were all in disarray.
- The caption below the cartoon reads “I think he’s getting the hang of it” indicating that Europe would eventually be able to utilize the Marshall Plan for a full recovery and would ultimately be stabilized by the influx of American aid.

The Price of Communism Containment for the Average American

- The Marshall planners were convinced that only a prosperous Europe would resist communism and that only a prosperous Europe would provide expanding markets for U.S. as well as European producers.
- The aim of the cartoon may not be overt criticism of the Marshall Plan as much as a simple commentary on the depth and level of American commitment.
- The character assisting the struggling cyclist is the American taxpayer and not the more traditional Uncle Sam character. The Marshall Plan, in other words, was a financial commitment that was born by the average American and not simply by a government decree.
- The Marshall Plan was only passed against heavy U.S. domestic opposition. American isolationists resented having to spend American taxpayers' money on foreign countries that had already defaulted on their previous debts from World War I. Businessmen didn't want to reconstruct competitor European industries. Congressmen only wanted to give food, not loans. The Soviet Union and its allies all the world over denounced the plan for strengthening the hold of U.S. capitalism on
Western Europe; hence the Soviet Union would not become a beneficiary of the plan, nor would Moscow permit any of its satellites to participate.

• Nevertheless, the plan worked. It succeeded in part because it gained widespread political acceptance within the United States itself--a remarkable political achievement.

• The expenditure involved was astronomical by the standards of the time. The Marshall Plan and other forms of foreign assistance between them cost the United States $17.6 billion (or $120 billion in current value for the Marshall Plan alone).
The Cold War (1947-91) was a sustained state of political and military tension between powers in the Western Bloc (the United States with NATO, 1949) and powers in the Eastern Bloc (the Soviet Union and its allies of the Warsaw Pact).

It was "cold" because there was no large-scale fighting directly between the two sides, although there were major regional wars in Korea (1950-53) and Vietnam (1964-73).

The U.S.S.R. and the U.S. were two superpowers with profound economic and political differences over Capitalism / Communism and Democracy / Totalitarianism. This was characterized in the West as The Free World vs. Behind the Iron Curtain.

The struggle for dominance was expressed via proxy wars around the globe, stockpiling nuclear weapons, psychological warfare, propaganda and espionage, and technological competitions such as the Space Race (Apollo 11 on the Moon, July 20, 1969).

The fear of communism in the U.S. spurred McCarthyism (Senator Joseph McCarthy): aggressive investigations and hearings, blacklisting, jailing and deportation of persons suspected of following communist or other left-wing ideologies.

2.2. Cold War Crises

Since the late 1940s, there was quite a number of Cold War crises:
• **The Berlin Blockade (1948-49):** the Soviet Union blocked the Western Allies’ railway, road, and canal access to the sectors of Berlin under allied control. In response, the Western Allies organized the Berlin airlift to carry supplies to the people in West Berlin. They flew over 200,000 flights in one year, providing up to 4700 tons of necessities daily. The blockade was lifted in May 1949 and resulted in the creation of two separate German states: the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) split up Berlin.
Illustration 5: U.S. Political Cartoon, 1948

- Claws: [fr. Griffes]
- Grizzly: [fr. ours brun]
- Peaked cap: [fr. casquette à visière]
- Encircle, surround (to): [fr. entourer de]
• **The Atomic Bomb and China (1949):** in 1949 the USSR also got the A-bomb, and continental China set up a communist state headed by Mao Zedong. In 1952, the USA created its H-Bomb, and a year later the USSR got its own.

• **The Korean War (1950-53):** communist North Korea attacked South Korea in June 1950. North Korea had been occupied by the USSR after WWII, and South Korea by the western Allies. The United Nations condemned the invasion and sent its troops (made up mostly of soldiers from the USA).
The People’s Republic of China (PRC) then sent troops (the People’s Volunteer
Army) to back up North Korea in 1951. The Panmunjon Armistice Agreement signed in July 1953 imposed the militarized borders that still exist today between the two Koreas. The Korean War showed that the USA was prepared to support a corrupt dictatorship (South Korea) to fight communism.

- **The Berlin Crisis (1958-61):** renewed tension in Berlin (the new Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev gave an ultimatum to the USA, UK and French troops present in Berlin to leave) ended with the building of the Berlin wall in August 1961 by the German Democratic Republic (to prevent the massive emigration of GDR's people).
Illustration 6: Bensch, Zwei Welten in Berlin [= Two Worlds in Berlin], June 26, 1963: U.S. president John Fitzgerald Kennedy's visit (political cartoon) [src].

Note: the bearded man is Walter Ulbricht (1893-1973) first secretary of the Socialist Unity Party, and as such the actual leader of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), from 1950 to 1971. From 1960, he was also the East German head of state.
Bars: [fr. *barreaux de prison*]

**Gallows** (tree), scaffold: [fr. *potence*] a wooden structure usually consisting of two upright posts with a crossbeam from which a rope is suspended, used for hanging criminals

**Knout**: a *stout* whip used formerly in Russia as an instrument of punishment.

**Limousine**: any large and luxurious car, esp. one that has a glass division between the driver and passengers

**Peplos**: is a body-length garment established as typical attire for women in ancient Greece by 500 BC.

**Prison, jail**: a public building used to house convicted criminals and accused persons remanded in custody and awaiting trial.

**Torch**: [fr. *torche*] is either a wooden or metal rod wrapped at one end with a material that has been impregnated with a flammable substance and ignited. The torch is a common emblem of both enlightenment and hope.

**The Free World**

During the cold war confrontation, the U.S.A. see themselves as the "Leader of the Free World":

- **Freedom**: JFK is wearing the robe, handing the torch, etc., of the famous Statue of Liberty:
- **Wealthy**: the big American limousine (a Cadillac?) is a part of the "American Dream" of prosperity.

**Behind the Iron Curtain: Totalitarian Communism**

East Germany protects itself from the "fascist" West with the Berlin wall built in August 1961. The GDR regime and its ruling party (the Socialist Unity Party of Germany) are repressive (knout, scaffold...) and undemocratic. The socialist centrally planned economy of the GDR is like that of the USSR. The population is concerned with the poor quality of food, housing, and clothing, which stood in dramatic contrast to the growing prosperity of West Germany.

- **The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)**: was a 13-day confrontation in October 1962 between the Soviet Union (Nikita Khrushchev) and Cuba (Fidel Castro) on one side and the U.S. (President John F. Kennedy) on the other side. Soviet missiles in Cuba, capable of carrying a thermonuclear warhead, effectively targeted the majority of the continental United States. The crisis is generally regarded as the moment in which the Cold War came closest to turning into a nuclear conflict. JFK and Khrushchev set up a means to converse directly via teletype in 1963: the Washington-Moscow “hotline” or “red telephone”.
2.3. The Vietnam War (1964-73)

- The Vietnam War (with U.S. involvement at its peak from 1964 to 1973) was a conflict between communist North Vietnam and U.S.-supported South Vietnam. According to the U.S. domino theory, if one state went Communist, other states in the region would follow. U.S. combat units were overtly sent there after the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Viet Cong, a lightly armed South Vietnamese communist common front directed by the North, fought a guerilla war. The conflict made the U.S.A. unpopular abroad and a large segment of the American population came to be opposed to U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, especially when the My Lai massacre (March 1968) became public knowledge in November 1969. The capture of Saigon at the hands of the North Vietnamese Army in April 1975 marked the end of the war. Probably about one million people were killed, including 60,000 U.S. troops.
GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

1. Human-Environment Interaction: Did the Saigon government or the Vietcong control more of South Vietnam in 1973?
2. Movement: Through what other countries did North Vietnamese troops move to invade South Vietnam?
Illustration 7: Mahood, The [London] Times, "This is proving to be excellent training for civilian life", 196? [src]

- African-American Civil Rights Movement: encompasses social movements in the United States whose goal was to end racial segregation and discrimination against black Americans.
- Bomber aircraft: [fr. Bombardier]
- Bullet: a projectile propelled by a firearm.
- Civilian life: [fr. dans le civil]
- Helicopter: [fr. Hélicoptère]
- Helmet: a form of protective gear worn to protect the head from injuries.
- Lynching: murder by mob, often by hanging.
- Rifle: a firearm designed to be fired from the shoulder.
It’s a Vietnam War Era Cartoon: the M16 rifle was deployed for jungle warfare operations in South Vietnam in 1963.

2.4. From the Détente (1968) to the end of the USSR (1991)

At the end of the 1960s, direct relations between the two superpowers got a little easier (there was a “détente”). Progress was made on:
- non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (the 1968 Non Proliferation Treaty);
- limiting the number of nuclear weapons of the superpowers (SALT I in 1972);
- improving East/West relations (Helsinki Accords in 1975: equality of rights among nations, territorial integrity, human rights...).

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to support the pro-Soviet regime there marked the end of the Détente. It was also the year of the revolution in Iran: Ayatollah Khomeini set up an Islamic republic and Iran became an enemy of the USA.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan, a Republican, was elected President of the USA. He succeeded in making the US more self-confident, economically and militarily stronger. Reagan fought Soviet influence in Third World countries, notably in Nicaragua and in Grenada (invaded in 1983).

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and, in 1988, launched the Perestroika (“restructuring” of the economic and social systems) and Glasnost (“transparency”, i.e. freedom of thought). In 1987, Reagan went to Berlin and gave a speech in which he challenged the Soviet leader to "open this gate... tear down this wall!". On the 9th of November 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. On the 25th December 1991, Gorbachev resigned; it was the end of the USSR and the end of the Cold War.

3. The Superpower since 1991

• The USA, post-Cold War, has been described as the hyperpower (i.e. the only superpower). Dominating economically and militarily the world, it acts (with or without UN consent) whenever and wherever it feels its interests are threatened.

• The 1991 Gulf War: in 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and in 1991 the US (President George Bush Senior, 1989-93) successfully led a coalition, under UN mandate, to free Kuwait. However, Saddam Hussein continued as dictator of Iraq for the next twelve years.

• The USA acted as peacemaker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (ex.: 1993 Oslo Accords). Notwithstanding, the problem is not solved.

• The USA contributed to resolving the conflicts in former Yugoslavia as part of NATO: in 1994 against the Bosnian Serbs (this led to the Dayton Peace Accords brokered by the USA in 1995) and in the Kosovo War in
1999 against Serbian forces (the NATO intervention had not been approved by the UN).

• The vulnerability of the USA to terrorist attacks was spectacularly demonstrated on the 11th September 2001 when al-Qaeda destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York City, symbol of America's economic domination, and attacked the Pentagon in Washington D.C., symbol of its military might. George W. Bush launched his War on Terror against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Bush Administration passed the controversial USA PATRIOT Act in 2001 and the Department of Homeland Security was set up in 2002 to coordinate anti-terrorist actions.

• In 2001, the USA led a coalition, under UN mandate, to attack the Taliban (they were supporters of Osama bin Laden, head of al-Qaeda) in Afghanistan (the last US soldiers are due to leave at the end of 2014).

• In 2003, the Bush Administration launched the Iraq War on the suspicion that Iraq held WMD (weapons of mass destruction) - no evidence of this was found - and that Saddam Hussein supported al-Qaeda. The invasion was not approved by the UN and lead to many anti-Bush protests throughout the world. Saddam Hussein, captured in 2003, was executed in 2006. The last US soldiers were pulled out in 2011. There were incidents of torture on the part of US soldiers, notably at Abu Ghraib prison (2003-4). Further controversy was the treatment of prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp (Gitmo). Bin Laden was killed in 2011 by special operations force.

• The loss of US influence as a result of these wars:
  - a view across the globe resulting from Abu Ghraib and range of missteps that the US has lost the moral high ground it had enjoyed for decades
  - US hegemony is still being challenged by Islamist terrorists.
  - the total cost of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has been estimated at between four and six trillion dollars.

• In September 2008, Lehman Brothers, an American investment bank, was the first of several financial institutions to go bust. The financial crisis became economic and social. Today U. S. government debt is about $17 trillion.

• Barack Hussein Obama became President of the USA in 2009. His message, at the height of the financial crisis, was one of national confidence: “Yes we can!” was his electoral slogan. Accusations from the republican right include being ineffectual in the Syrian civil war (since 2011) and too conciliatory with Iran over its nuclear arms capacity. Many liberals see no difference with the foreign policy of previous Administrations: the intensive use of drones and extensive National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance (see: Edward Snowden’s disclosures since 2013) are, for them, proof of the usual imperialist stance of the USA...
Conclusion

The world is now more multipolar, the USA having to share decision-making with other emerging centres of power:

People's Republic of China is on the rise thanks to its smooth diplomacy, its realignment with Russia and its aggressive drive to form new alliances with nations extending from Asia and Africa to South America.

Russia's recent bold moves in Ukraine combined with Russian President Vladimir V. Putin's domestic popularity and his growing reputation for effectively standing up to the West.

The European Union, an heterogeneous grouping of 28 member states, seems to be quite unable to convert her economic might in geopolitical clout.

This multipolar world seems less stable than the bipolar world of the Cold War period (1947-91).