

Isolationism Syllabus

Week One: a. 1920. A nation disillusioned with American intervention in World War I and the Treaty of Versailles turns inward to isolationism. Harding Administration's foreign policy is limited to asserting commercial interests in Latin America and Caribbean, occasionally with armed force. Diplomacy in an isolationist time: arms limitation agreements.

b. Depression. US attempts aukarky which deepens misery here and abroad. Japan invades Manchuria and Germany rearms. Hitler takes office. US officially quiescent.

Week Two: a. US remains a spectator at Anschluss, Japan's invasion of China. America First movement arises led by Charles Lindbergh who is intensely isolationist. German American Bund gives vocal support to Hitler. Communist Party of the US supports USSR's effort to remain neutral (until Hitler-Stalin Pact). Prevailing view, US should stay out of any war that might break out. "America First"

b. Roosevelt's quiet effort to support UK. The draft decision by one vote. State of US armed forces. Lend Lease.

Week Three a. Pearl Harbor, War and the end of US isolation (for the moment). The massive build up. Roosevelt's and Churchill's divergent war aims. Invasion of North Africa then Italy.

b. Normandy and the push toward Germany by the Allies, rapid westward movement by Soviet forces. Eisenhower's decision to consolidate gains, thus permitting Soviets to take Berlin and eastern Germany.

Week 4. a. Yalta and the formal recognition of the de facto position of the two sets of armies. Despite agreement's terms, USSR imposes Communist governments across Eastern Europe. Rapid American troop drawdown and disarmament in Europe, based on an expectation that conflict is over on all fronts and the US can return to pre war remoteness from European affairs.

b. The first signs of conflict. Churchill's iron curtain speech in Missouri marks the start of the Cold War. US aid to Turkey and Greece. The Kennan Telegram and adoption of containment as US policy. The militarization of that policy. Competition in Asia and Africa as well as Europe. Formation of NATO and SEATO. Korean War.

Week 5. a. The Bay of Pigs fiasco leads to the Cuban Missile Crisis which in turn engenders a much more cautious and nuanced approach to US management of Cold War relations. The early intervention in Vietnam is limited. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, however, buys into the domino concept and doubles down. This costs him the presidency.

b. Nixon takes office with a commitment to extraction from the war. He seeks an “honorable” way out but fails and the war runs four more years with heavy casualties. His China initiative no doubt damped down Chinese support for the Vietnamese.

Week 6. a. The price paid, first in Korea and then in Vietnam. Public attitudes begin to shift from resistance to communism everywhere to growing doubts about constant fighting in far places. Nixon temporarily short circuits the problem by ending the draft which in turn ends serious public interest in the many conflicts that follow

b. Collapse of the USSR in 1989 and the freeing of Eastern Europe. US now emerges as the sole super power but with strong alliances, particularly NATO and Japan. US perceived at home and throughout the industrial world largely as a benign force and trusted to keep the peace. American diplomacy vital and very well staffed. The apogee of the leadership role and perspective is the brilliant diplomacy that led to the assembly of a host of allies in the First Gulf War.

Week 7 Terrorism a minor problem abroad but not here. Then comes 9/11 and the American public wakes to find that we are not universally loved and that our leadership is not universally desired. We respond, understandably, with force in Afghanistan and, profoundly foolishly, in Iraq, Delicate balances in the Middle East crumble. Al Qaeda flourishes and ISIS emerges. The US public watches professional armed forces take serious casualties but hardly reacts. No replay of the 60s, thanks to the absence of a draft.

Week 8 a, Trump and the great reversal. Rhetoric from the ‘30s reemerges: Make America Great Again and above all “America First”. The ahistorical candidate apparently does not know the about the last use of the term. As a private citizen, Trump had spoken out against America’s wars (and for causes he later as president fought against, eg, choice).

b. As vengeance against Obama, possibly but not likely from conviction, Trump reverses agreements crafted by his predecessor: The Paris Climate Accord, the Iran Nuclear deal, the Trans Pacific Partnership. He threatens to pull out of NATO and trade deals with Europe, Korea, Japan but was pulled back by the “adults” then on the White House staff. Trumpian “diplomacy is isolationist and monarchic and ineffective. The departure of the “adults” gives Trump freer rein to generate crises – economic and geopolitical – which he then splashily sometimes resolves. The Iran case ifs the most dangerous with no resolution in sight.