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Isolationism in American Foreign Policy

An analysis of the US-foreign policy in the 1920

Abstract

With the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and his slogan: "America first", a new era of foreign politics was predicted, an era of isolationism. America's foreign policy in the 1920s was marked as isolationist as well. But to what extent was the United States of America in the twenties of the twentieth century isolationist in their foreign policy? To establish an answer, I defined the term isolationism, and I have focused on three main themes: institutes, the peace movement and international justice. To use the three characteristics of isolationism, unilateralism, abstention, and non-interventionism, it became clearer as to how the United States positioned itself in world politics. The international foreign policy of the United States in the 1920s was neither entirely isolationist nor entirely internationalist. This study made clear that the US-government operated in different situations differently, taking into account what was thought to be feasible in a specific situation.

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Introduction

With the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and his slogan: “America first”, a new era of foreign politics was predicted. His slogan “America first” emphasizes his focus on putting his country first, wanting to ignore the rest of the world to achieve his goals. *New America* even refers to the America First Committee, a committee that was founded in 1940 as an anti-war movement.¹ The slogan thus originated from an isolationist movement that was an advocate to not get involved in foreign wars and conflict. In other areas Trump is also not intending to act internationally. Trump is not planning on intervening in other countries to introduce democratic regimes.² He wants to focus on American democratic values that were drafted in the Declaration of Independence and are the core of the American democratic system. Besides the military actions he is taking, or is not taking, he wants to focus on America’s own economy. To do this, he is pulling out of several treaties, among which is the Trans Pacific Partnership.³ Because of this attempt to put America first and the rest of the world second, Trump is known as someone who has isolationist intentions.

The characterisation of Trump’s foreign policy as isolationist takes us back to the early years of the twentieth century. America’s foreign policy in the 1920s was marked as isolationist as well. The United States decided, after World War I, that it was not necessarily beneficial to interfere in other countries because of the losses they led. This is why the terms isolationism and foreign policy are intertwined with this era. It was a reaction to the occurrences of World War I. Because of the election of Trump, the term isolationism again arises in different settings and articles. This automatically generates new questions about the term and its characteristics. Is it really applicable to the twenties of the twentieth century? Or is that just a general assumption, a widespread cliché? Did the United States actually stay out of international affairs, or was there still some international interference? These questions all lead to one important question: to what extent was the United States of America in the twenties of the twentieth century isolationist in their foreign policy?

¹ Heather Hurlburt and Elena Souris, ‘Isolationism in the Trump Era of “America First”’ (version 24 August 2017), <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/edition-174/isolationism-trump-era-america-first/> (15 February 2018).

² Michael Persson, ‘Trump kiest isolationisme’ (version 27 april 2016), <https://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/trump-kiest-isolationisme~a4290684/> (15 February 2018).

³ ‘De Amerikaanse terugtrek-doctrine’ (version 15 October 2017), <https://fd.nl/economie-politiek/1222704/de-amerikaanse-terugtrek-doctrine> (15 February 2018).

To answer that question, it is necessary to define isolationism. This is not an easy task. America is, from the outset, always considered to be isolationist.⁴ Yet isolationism is a term that is explained in different settings and is used by different groups. A lot of times it is even used without defining the term. Fensterwald Jr., an attorney for the State Department, talks in 1958 about the different uses of the term isolationism. The first time the term was used, was in the middle of the nineteenth century, to define non-expansionists.⁵ In the beginning of the twentieth century, it was used to describe Bryan Democrats, who were not necessarily against commercial or, for example, religious expansion, but were opposing overseas expansion. They were opposing, because they felt expansionism was in contrast to what the Declaration of Independence proclaimed.⁶ During WWI, people who were against American interference in this war were labelled isolationists. And eventually the term was used to describe the people who disagreed to entering the League of Nations and other international encounters in the 1920s.⁷ Using the word to indicate different groups in different periods, does make 'isolationism' a difficult term to pinpoint to one meaning. In this essay that is focusing on the 1920s, I will use it for the last mentioned group.

For a better understanding, I define isolationism by its characteristics. Following Braumoeller, a first important characteristic of isolationism is '*the voluntary and general abstention by a state from security-related activity in an area of the international system in which it is capable of action.*'⁸ This implies that a country withholds from interfering with other countries. When a government has isolationist viewpoints, it believes that world affairs should be more restricted, and less active than a government who has an internationalist standpoint. A nation has internationalist views when they are interested in multilateral engagements, and wants to cooperate with other countries on a political, cultural, and economic level.⁹

Andrew Johnstone, professor in American history, points at two other characteristics of isolationism: *unilateralism* and *non-interventionism*. Both were concepts introduced first by Wayne Cole, leading scholar on isolationism, and Manfred Jonas, scholar of American political

⁴ Bernard Fensterwald, 'The Anatomy of American "isolationism" and Expansionism. Part I', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2 (1958) 2, 112.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Fred H. Harrington, 'The Anti-Imperialist Movement in the United States, 1898-1900', *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 22 (1935) 2, 211-230, 211.

⁷ Fensterwald Jr, "The anatomy of American" isolationism" and expansionism. Part I.", 112.

⁸ Bear F. Braumoeller, 'The Myth of American Isolationism', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6 (2010) 4, p. 349-371, 354.

⁹ Andrew Johnstone, 'Isolationism and Internationalism in American Foreign Relations', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 9 (2011) 1, 7-20, 14.

history, to describe isolationism.¹⁰ Non-interventionism focuses on political engagement and military entanglements. With non-interventionism comes non-involvement in, for example, conflicts between great European powers. Johnstone defines unilateralism as ‘the nation’s insistence on retaining freedom of action at all times, and its refusal to be restricted by multilateral treaties or international organisations.’¹¹ This means that a government does not want to be committed to specific engagements that would limit its freedom to manoeuvre. Unilateralism connects to isolationism, as does non-interventionism. When these two are combined with Braumoeller’s characteristic of abstention, the term isolationism becomes complete. The ultimate characteristic of an isolationist state is abstention from interfering in other state’s conflicts, withdrawing from the international stage and focusing on its own national interests.

Many scholars have written articles questioning the fact that American foreign policy was indeed isolationist. William Appleman Williams, author of ‘The Legend of Isolationism,’ argues that the use of the term isolationism is misleading, and that there was discussion in the Senate and between the President and Congress about international relations.¹² Another scholar, David G. Haglund, examines the question ‘are we the isolationists?’ Here he questions if isolationism was indeed practiced or just merely a sentiment that prevailed.¹³ The debates in these studies are crucial for a better understanding of American foreign policy in the 1920s.. My research will contribute to these debates, first and foremost because of the clear definition of isolationism that I will use. The current research is often confusing, as the term isolationism is not well-defined and used in all kinds of ways, to define all kinds of groups.

To establish whether the foreign policy of America was isolationist in the twenties, I have included in my research both literature and primary sources. The primary sources I use are collected in the *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*. In these papers, the messages of the President to the Congress are found, as well as correspondence between different countries and the Secretary of State. The letters that were sent between ambassadors and the American government are also used in my research. Here I found the processes that handle different decisions on the international stage of politics. These papers are formative to create a complete picture of the international relations of America in this era.

¹⁰ Johnstone, ‘Isolationism and Internationalism in American Foreign Relations’, 10; Manfred Jonas, *Isolationism in America, 1935-1941* (Ithaca 1966).

¹¹ Johnstone, ‘Isolationism and Internationalism in American Foreign Relations’, 11.

¹² William Appleman Williams, ‘The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920’s’, *Science & Society* 18 (1954) 1, 1–20, 5.

¹³ David G. Haglund, “‘Are We the Isolationists?’: North American Isolationism in a Comparative Context”, *International Journal: Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 58 (2003)1, 1.

In my research I differentiate the image of 'the' American foreign policy by distinguishing different parties, like the President, the Secretary of State, the Senate, the Congress and individual Congressmen. I will be looking at four Presidents: Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), Warren G. Harding (1921-1923), Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929), and Herbert Hoover (1929-1933). An important question is whether these parties shared the same points of view on matters of foreign policy and on specific themes in world politics.

This study concentrates on three of these themes. The first theme concerns world institutes. The focus will be on the League of Nations and the Reparations Commission, and the role of the United States in those institutes. It is important how the United States acted towards the League of Nations. Although the League had been largely an American idea, the US did not enter as a member. With regard to the Reparation Commission, it should be noted that the US-government first pulled out, but later re-joined the Commission. How can these changes be explained? How can they be regarded in the framework of isolationism?

The second theme of research is the peace movement. Literature makes clear that this movement influenced the government of the United States, but did it make the government less isolationist? This study will particularly focus on the attempts of disarmament of different countries and the Washington Naval Conference of 1921.

The third and last theme is the foreign policy regarding international justice. This study will look both at the initiative to establish a World Court and the Kellogg-Briand Pact. What was the attitude towards both initiatives within the American government? Could this attitude be defined as isolationist?

With the extensive research on the different perspectives of the foreign policy of the United States it is useful to analyse if these measures were isolationist. Every aspect will be put in the isolationist framework. This will give us a conclusion about whether we could indeed call the United States isolationist in the 1920s.

1. World institutes

One of the most important aspects of foreign policy is the way in which the government of the United States positioned itself to the institutes that were established in the 1920s. To establish the position of the United States, I look at various events and trends during the 1920s. The decisive circumstance was the decision to not ratify the Treaty of Versailles by the Senate. This is a situation that is often labelled as isolationist. Because of that decision, an important turning point in foreign politics arose. The League of Nations was established and the United States decided not to join the League. Though America did not join, they did attend different conferences. The US was also involved in the Reparation Commission, that was embedded in the Versailles Treaty. They joined that Commission with the expectation of ratifying the treaty. When this did not happen, a peculiar power play began. These aspects of different involvement in foreign affairs will paint a picture about the real position the United States had on a global level concerning institutes.

League of Nations

In 1910, Theodore Roosevelt mentioned for the first time a participation in a league of nations. Woodrow Wilson wanted to make this idea into an effective organisation.¹⁴ In his address to Congress, he supported the agreements that were made when the League of Nations were formed. His address had labour as topic, but stressed the importance to have a League that can form rules about these kind of topics.

The whole world gave its recognition and endorsement to these fundamental purposes in the League of Nations. [...] The establishment of the principles regarding labor laid down in the covenant of the League of Nations offers us the way to industrial peace and conciliation.¹⁵

He was convinced that the League would take the role of the global entity that would formulate strong principles where the people can fall back on.

The League was drafted in the Treaty of Versailles as a covenant. When the interwar years are considered, the inability of the American Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles has dominated the scholarly research of American foreign policy. The term isolationism emerged

¹⁴ Ronald E. Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance: American Isolationism, Internationalism, and Europe, 1901-1950* (New York, 1991), 14.

¹⁵ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1919: Message of the President of the United States to Congress, December 2, 1919, XVI.

because of this incapacity to ratify the Treaty.¹⁶ In March 1920, the treaty was rejected by the Senate, and a group called the Irreconcilables were the biggest opponents. They consistently voted against the Treaty. It did not matter which reservations or amendments were formed, they were impossible to persuade. The Treaty needed a supermajority, what meant it needed two-thirds of the Senate, because it was an international treaty. That supermajority was not met and the Senate fell seven senators short to ratify the Treaty.¹⁷

Unfortunately for Wilson, the participation of the United States to the League of Nations never happened. Senator William Borah, the so-called leader of the Irreconcilables, feared that the democracy of the United States would be tainted if they would tie themselves to the League and everything that would come with that ratification.¹⁸ He did want to promote peace and democracy without binding the United States to a League. Borah can be seen as a unilateralist, someone who does not want a nation to be restricted by an international organisation. That is one of the characteristics of an isolationist.

Wilson also had a part in the failure of the ratification. Paul Johnson mentions the fact that in the Senate a majority of the Republicans were in favour of some kind of league.¹⁹ Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the Republican leader, was an internationalist, just like his predecessors Henry Adams and Theodore Roosevelt. However, he had concerns with the Fourteen Points of Wilson. His reservations amended the treaty, and the only one who did not agree was Wilson. Wilson was in poor health at the moment, and his leadership suffered because of it. Wilson had 23 votes on his side, and they all voted against Lodge's reservations. As an effect, America rejected the membership of the League.²⁰ Wilson accidentally started an isolationist trend in the American government.

When Warren G. Harding became President in 1921, he went into foreign politics with the message that they were 'confident of their ability to work out their destiny and jealously guarding their right to do so.'²¹ Harding did not mind the fact that the United States were not a member of the League of Nations. He even tried to ignore the League.²² In his speech of accepting the Republican nomination for President, he already expressed his opinion about the League.

¹⁶ Braumoeller, 'The Myth of American Isolationism', 355.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 355.

¹⁸ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 19.

¹⁹ Paul Johnson, 'The Myth of American Isolationism: Reinterpreting the Past', ed. David Fromkin, *Foreign Affairs* 74 (1995) 3, 162.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy since 1900* (Chicago, 1999), 27.

²² Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 29.

It is better to be a free and disinterested agent of international justice and advancing civilization, with the covenant of conscience, than be shackled by a written compact which surrenders our freedom of action and gives a military alliance the right to proclaim America's duty to the world.²³

In 1921 his State Department would refuse to answer messages from the League.²⁴ When it became clear that the administration would not let America be a member, Charles Evan Hughes, the Secretary of State, started responding to messages in 1922. This resulted in America receiving invitations to join a few conferences. While the United States was not part of the League, they accepted invitations. The role the United States played was unofficial. In a back and forth letter exchange between the Council of the League of Nations and the government of the United States, the reserved role of the US came to the fore. In a letter from the Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby, it is apparent that they are interested in attending the International Financial Conference at Brussels in September 1920. However, the Secretary of State said that

this Government would not see its way to appoint an official delegation representing the Government. [...] While these delegates will not be authorized to bind or commit this Government in any way, they will be authorized to take part in the discussions of the Conference, for the purpose of giving information.²⁵

The appointment of an unofficial delegation sent a clear message. The United States did want to get and provide information, but they did not send people who could make decisions that could bind the Government. This indicates an unilateral approach. The administration of Harding had an isolationist approach to the League that formed a pattern which Hughes followed, and others after him. Hughes believed this was the best that the administration could do, and in effect, the United States did recognize the League without officially participating.²⁶ They did not want to be obligated to be limited in their own national actions. The call for America's presence at the Conference does correspond with Ninkovich' statement that the support for the United States still existed without their participation in the League of Nations. Other countries relied on the United States as the world's political leader and economic power.²⁷

²³ Warren G. Harding, 'Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination', June, 1920, accessed 14 March, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=76198&st=League&st1=>

²⁴ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 29.

²⁵ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1920, Volume I: The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in France (Wallace), September 17, 1920, 95.

²⁶ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 29.

²⁷ Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*, 79, 80.

The question remains if the United States saw themselves in this role, and if they would act according to what was expected of them.

The League of Nations established the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation. The organisations were engaged with different kind of problems that existed in the post-war world. There was a global recognition for these problems, and the opinion was that these problems needed to be solved through international collaboration.²⁸ These international bodies, even more than the League of Nations, stimulated the idea to work together across national borders. The United States became involved in these organisations, and continued to participate in different conferences of the League. The public got used to America sitting at the table, but joining the League of Nations was not an option. This indicates a unilateral approach. They did want the information, but they did not want the obligations that came with a membership of the League. According to Ninkovich, the League was regarded as a European organisation in which the United States would not belong.²⁹ Although the US were not pulling back on joining conferences, because of the unofficial status of their position, the American policy in this area could indeed be labelled as isolationist.

Reparations Commission

As part of the Versailles Peace Treaty, the Reparations Commission supervised the reparation payments of the Germans and supervised the further commitments they had to fulfil. They had the right to decide whether or not Germany held their end of the bargain.³⁰ The United States had an unofficial representation that was part of the Commission. When the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles was shot down by the Senate, the interest in participating in the Commission went down with it.³¹ The withdrawal of the United States in the Commission is conforming to the isolationist tendencies of the Senate and the nonparticipation in the League.

The Ambassador of France, Hugh Campbell Wallace, disagreed with the administration to stop participating in the Commission.

Any method of withdrawal from the Reparation Commission would, it seems to me, appear undignified. Only the election has occurred to change the situation, and this may be

²⁸ Akira Iriye, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, 1993) 80.

²⁹ Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*, 90.

³⁰ Frank Costigliola, 'The United States and the Reconstruction of Germany in the 1920s', *The Business History Review* 50 (1976) 4, 493.

³¹ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1921, Volume I: The Acting Secretary of State to Diplomatic Representatives in Certain Countries, January 12, 1921, 4.

interpreted to mean modification or even abandonment of the League, or it may be thought inconclusive, depending chiefly upon the opinion of the interpreter.³²

Wallace saw this development as an ill-advised move. His opinion did matter to the acting Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby, and he replied quickly to the Ambassador. They attempted to put someone in the Commission, in a formal role, but Congress was not interested at the time. He stressed that he thought it necessary that they were seated in the Commission, and used the words important and tangible.³³ This is an example of Congress, who had multiple strong isolationists in their midst, who impeded the participation of America in this era. They wanted to minimize foreign interference as much as possible.

This did not stop the President of the Allied Conference, Lloyd George, to write the government of the United States. He was convinced that the US needed to be in the Commission, because ‘the settlement of the international difficulties in which the world is still involved would be materially assisted by the co-operation of the United States.’³⁴ Clearly, the other world powers needed America to assist in settling the problems that, especially, the European countries were struggling with. Now the government of the United States showed interest:

‘The Government of the United States, while maintaining the traditional policy of abstention from participation in matters of distinctly European concern, is deeply interested in the proper economic adjustments and in the just settlement of the matters of world wide importance which are under discussion in these conferences, and desires helpfully to cooperate in the deliberations upon these questions.’³⁵

What stands out is that the American government was merely interested out of economic reasons. Businessmen and political leaders were convinced that if the European economic landscape was at ease, the American would be as well. Europe suffered from inflation, and, as a result, the American markets were unstable.³⁶ The government wanted to avoid this situation by sitting at the table to discuss economic problems. Hughes emphasized to ambassador Harvey in Great Britain, that he was ‘not to commit the Government of the United States to any action

³² ‘Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States’, 1921, Volume I: The Ambassador of France (Wallace) to the Acting Secretary of State, December 20, 1921, 2.

³³ ‘Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States’, 1921, Volume I: Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador of France (Wallace), February 10, 1921, 5.

³⁴ ‘Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States’, 1921, Volume I: The President of the Allied Conference (Lloyd George) to the Government of the United States, May 6, 1921, 12.

³⁵ ‘Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States’, 1921, Volume I: the Government of the United States to the President of the Allied Conference (Lloyd George), May 6, 1921, 13.

³⁶ Costigliola, ‘The United States and the Reconstruction of Germany in the 1920s’, 478.

on its part.³⁷ Their goal was purely to acquire information, but not to take action in any way. In this case, the interference on the international stage was minimalized. They wanted to keep themselves distant from the discussions about boundaries that concerned European countries.³⁸ The position of the American government in this context could be labelled as a unilateral one, and can be compared with their approach toward the League. The United States took place in the Commission, but did not want to meddle in business they had no interest in. This is similar to their behaviour towards the League. With this approach they decided to put America first in the discussions - always with their own interests in the back of their mind. A good example is the urgent letter James Logan, the unofficial American delegate to the Commission, wrote to Hughes in 1923:

We cannot emphasize too much or too strongly that any form of the present policy [of military sanctions] ... is disastrous for reparations, for Germany, for France, and for all outside nations, both from the point of view of economics and of peace, which is one of the most important factors in economics.³⁹

The focus on the economic impacts was clear, and that was evidently the most important focal point of the United States without being explicitly internationalist.

By first removing themselves from the Commission, and returning to the table with conditions, they created a comfortable position in the Commission. They were not obligated to take action, because they simply refused to agree to those kind of arrangements. They received the information about the economic health of the other countries in the Commission from the source. The unilateralist position that the Congress preferred, was extended in the Commission. By joining them in this way, the government still received intelligence about the processes in the Commission, and satisfied Congress by not doing it officially.

³⁷ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1921, Volume I: The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Great Britain (Harvey), May 11, 1921, 15.

³⁸ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1921, Volume I: The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Great Britain (Harvey), May 18, 1921, 16.

³⁹ Melvyn P. Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920-2015* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 99.

2. Peace movement

After the war, multiple countries wanted to secure the peace. The public did not want another war, and governments wanted to ensure that. The pursuit of peace is a concatenation of actions to secure the peace, and to promote peaceful negotiations. A phenomenon that is worth the research, is the call for disarmament that flowed from the Treaty of Versailles. This trend even caused the organisation of a conference to limit naval armament in the beginning of the decade. The movement put pressure on the President of the United States and the Secretary of State in multiple situations. The research into this peace movement can clarify what kind of impact this movement had on the foreign policy of the American Government.

Pursuit of Peace

President Harding starts his message to the Congress on December 6, 1921 on a positive note:

It is a very gratifying privilege to come to Congress with the Republic at peace with all the nations of the world. More, it is equally gratifying to report that our country is not only free from every impending menace of war, but there are growing assurances of the permanency of the peace which we so deeply cherish.⁴⁰

Here he expressed his gratitude that the world was much more peaceful than the decade before. In the 1920s the word peace became the term used by political leaders to show economic welfare and political stability.⁴¹ When the world order was peaceful, the domestic order would also be in peace. The believe that cultural and intellectual cooperation was the vehicle to contribute to the peace movement and internationalism, was very much part of the American culture.⁴² A segment of the American public influenced the government of the United States. Scholars and writers could instigate a feeling of wanting peace in the public. The spectrum of the different people that believed in peace as the ideology to follow, was a very broad one. Both internationalists and isolationists spoke out strongly against war. The anti-war movement did not consist out of one social group, but out of multiple layers of social class.⁴³ This was the reason that the US government could not ignore the movement.

⁴⁰ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1921, Volume 1: Message of the President of the United States to Congress, December 6, 1921, XX-XXI.

⁴¹ Iriye, 'The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations', 104.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 111.

⁴³ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 31.

The pursuit of peace united the American people in believing that the United States had to obtain the leader position in promoting worldwide democratic peace.⁴⁴ Different groups formed multiple organisations and associations to organise themselves. This caused different views on how to realize peace in the world order. The three main groups were the conservative peace advocates, the progressives, and the radicals. The conservatives wanted to solidify the conventions of The Hague concerning the peaceable settlement of disputes.⁴⁵ The progressives wanted the law reformed to maintain the social order. However, just as the conservatives, they wanted no part in international politics. A good example was the National Committee for the Prevention of War, who were convinced peacekeepers needed to put America first.⁴⁶ The radical organisations treated war as a sin, and they wanted the immediate abolition of war.⁴⁷ The radical movement was the smallest movement, but the most effective. It caused the Secretary of State to sign the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928, to outlaw war as a national policy.⁴⁸

Though the peace movement was not something that originated in the American government, and seems to have an awkward place in the topics already discussed, it did influence the American administrations to contribute on an international political stage. The movement obligated the government to put effort into, for example, conferences and the signing of international treaties. One accomplishment, that also will be discussed further on, was the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Because of the movement and different organisations, the government had no choice but to be semi-internationalist.

Disarmament

One great example for American foreign policy not being entirely isolationist, is the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-1922. This conference was the first step for the call for disarmament. The conference was a product of the peace movement and was initiated by Senator William Borah, which is remarkable, because he loathed the League of Nations and the international agreements that came with it. However, he encouraged disarmament and creating international commitments to accomplish that, because he opposed war and wanted to maintain the peace. He proposed an assembly of the three powers, Great Britain, Japan, and the United

⁴⁴ Alex Goodall, 'US Foreign Relations under Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover', in *A Companion to Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover*, ed. Katherine A. S. Sibley (Chichester, 2014), 65.

⁴⁵ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 31.

⁴⁶ Robert H. Ferrell, 'The Peace Movement', in *Isolation and Security: Ideas and Interests in Twentieth-Century American Foreign Policy*, ed. Alexander DeConde (Durham, 1957), 101.

⁴⁷ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 49.

States.⁴⁹ Braumoeller states that this is one of the reasons that there were no true isolationists in the Senate, because the Irreconcilables were the ones who promoted the conference, and disarmament.⁵⁰ Hughes needed to lead the conference towards agreements that the Senate could accept. He invited four major powers, Great Britain, Japan, France, and Italy.⁵¹

The Naval Conference was not just to agree upon the disarmament of the nations, but also to better relations between different states. The British Prime Minister was maybe not capable of coming to the Conference. Hughes expresses his disappointment, written down in a memorandum:

That the Secretary thought that his presence here would do much more toward cementing British-American relations than any number of discussions; that the American people would be very glad to greet the only Prime Minister who had officially survived the war.⁵²

Better international relations between countries were a goal on its own. Analysis of this quote makes clear that according to Hughes the conference was also taking place to strengthen the bond with European states. He saw that favourable relations with Great Britain were desirable. Both the Netherlands and Portugal wanted a seat at the table at the Conference, because they saw the importance in participating in the discussions around disarmament.⁵³ Hughes invited them, and also China and Belgium. The United States positioned itself in the discussions as the leader. Hughes did this when, in his opening speech, he clarified what he expected of the participants, and he announced what kind of proposals he wanted to lay on the table.⁵⁴ The United States government could pressure other states towards the goals the US wanted to accomplish, because of its beneficial financial position in the world order.⁵⁵

In a message of president Harding to the Senate on February 10, 1922, he presented the outcome of the naval conference as a great success. He is quite surprised by the Senate, which already advised in favour of a couple of treaties.⁵⁶ The statement Braumoeller gave about the fact that there were no true isolationists in Congress, might not have been so wrong after all. Nevertheless, the Senate had ulterior motives. Some members of the Senate wanted to get rid

⁴⁹ Benjamin D. Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1941: The Golden Age of American Diplomatic and Military Complacency* (Westport, 2001), 41.

⁵⁰ Braumoeller, 'The Myth of American Isolationism', 355.

⁵¹ Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1941*, 41.

⁵² 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1921, Volume I: Memorandum by the Secretary of State of a Conversation with the British Ambassador (Geddes), September 20, 1921', 71.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 54-56, 74.

⁵⁴ Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1941*, 42.

⁵⁵ Braumoeller, 'The Myth of American Isolationism', 356.

⁵⁶ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1922, Volume 1: Message of President Harding to the Senate, February 10, 1922 – Report of the American Delegation, 298, 299.

of the alliance the United States signed in 1902 with Japan. This alliance expired in the year of the conference, and the American government did not want to have defence requirements.⁵⁷ They achieved this because Japanese and British delegates were in no position to go against it. The United States had an advantageous financial position that was too strong. In this instance, it becomes apparent that the United States' government saw their own beneficial opportunity in the concluding of this agreement. In the way they undertook their foreign policy, there was always a benefit for domestic politics. In this manner, their foreign policy was international in a practical way. Still, their approach was quite isolationist. Every foreign effort was handled with the Senate in the back of their minds, and especially Borah. Hughes wanted to accomplish something on an international level, though he wanted the least involvement at the same time, because the Senate had to approve.

However, the Harding administration did want to be known as an administration that made a difference on an international level. In a message to Congress on December 8, 1922, Harding said the following: 'Those who assume that we played our part in the World war and later took ourselves aloof and apart, unmindful of world obligation, give scant credit to the helpful part we assume in international relationships.'⁵⁸ Here he stressed the crucial role of the United States in the conference. To assume that the American government, as a whole, was isolationist, is with regard to the issue of world peace and disarmament a simplification. The different viewpoints in the government make it difficult to put just one term on the United States foreign policy.

The main accomplishment of the Washington Conference was the Five Power Naval Treaty and the Four Power Treaty. These were the first agreements in modern history where disarmament was captured on paper. With that came the banning of 'asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and all analogous liquids, materials and devices.'⁵⁹ The Five Power Treaty contained the agreement that all the participating nations will cease production of capital ships, and to abolish existing ships.⁶⁰ Agreed upon was that Japan could have sixty percent of the amount of the navy that Great Britain and America had. This was called the 5-5-3 ratio. Japan only agreed to this, because a clause contained the agreement of non-fortification.⁶¹ President

⁵⁷ Braumoeller, 'The Myth of American Isolationism', 356; Iriye, 'The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations', 76.

⁵⁸ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1922, Volume 1: Message of the President of the United States to Congress, December 8, 1922, XVIII-XIX.

⁵⁹ Andrew Webster, 'Making Disarmament Work: The Implementation of the International Disarmament Provisions In the League of Nations Covenant, 1919-1925', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 16 (2005) 3, 561.

⁶⁰ Braumoeller, 'The Myth of American Isolationism', 355, 356.

⁶¹ Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*, 88.

Harding stated in his message to the Senate that ‘all the signatories have given up certain rights which they had, as their contribution to concord and peace, but at no sacrifice of national pride, with no regret or resentment to later flame in conflict.’⁶² He stressed the fact that every nation had to give up a great deal of armament. To give up this right to having a certain amount of armament and the discontinuation of the producing of armament, the United States showed that they were willing to secure the peace on international terms, and in this case was able to waiver a piece of their own space in politics.

Hughes did negotiate these terms with persuasion, and the government benefited thoroughly. Not only did they get what they wanted, the abrogation of the alliance with Japan, they also made a name for themselves as peacemakers. The agreements made at the conference were also designed to stabilize Asian-Pacific relations. Hughes had to deal with an isolationist Senate who were in favour of disarmament, yet, not in further engagements. Though the conference was a step towards international collaboration, Hughes was limited in what he could agree upon. The Secretary of State had to work within these limits, which did not necessarily make the United States an isolationist nation. It only highlighted the complicated position the Secretary of State had.

⁶² ‘Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States’, 1922, Volume 1: Message of President Harding to the Senate, February 10, 1922 – Report of the American Delegation, 300.

3. International Justice

International justice is something that was barely institutionalized in the 1920s. In 1899 and 1907, the United States organised Peace Conferences in The Hague. The first steps toward an international justice system were set at those conferences. The topics that were discussed there were disarmament, arbitration, and laws of war.⁶³ In the 1920s the United States took other steps to establish an international justice system. Two events illustrate this in a surprising way. The desire of America to join the World Court, is something that is interestingly opposite to staying out of other countries' affairs. Another pact that has closed this decade, is the Kellogg-Briand Pact. In this pact, war is outlawed as a national foreign policy. These two events may be marked as internationalist, nevertheless, it is a complex layering of different influences in the actions of the United States.

Membership of the World Court

The World Court was established in 1922, and was an initiative of the League of Nations. The Court's power was modest to say the least. The Court could not handle cases when they were not asked. Both countries involved in a case had to accept and refer to the Court. When the Court had ruled a decision, the Court had little power to enforce the ruling.⁶⁴ The Court spoke to internationalists, because it was part of a bigger project. This was obtaining an ideal of a rule of law in foreign politics. Harding, and Hughes, and later Coolidge, were all in favour of American participation.⁶⁵ Especially Hughes wanted a membership. He supported the notion of an international justice system, and saw a great opportunity in the World Court. Harding did question if the Court would be adopted by the isolationist-dominated Foreign Relations Committee. To tackle this problem, Hughes made a few reservations to the agreement. First, and foremost, it declared that the membership of the United States would not be formal. It constitutes no legal obligation towards the League of Nations. Second, America wanted to be able to insert American judges in the election for judges of the Court. The third reservation stated that Congress could determine the right amount of expenses that were paid to the Court. And lastly, the statutes of the Court could only be changed with American approval.⁶⁶

⁶³ Geoffrey Best, 'Peace Conferences and the Century of Total War: The 1899 Hague Conference and What Came after', *International Affairs* 75 (1999) 3, 619-634, 625.

⁶⁴ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 29.

⁶⁵ Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1941*, 46.

⁶⁶ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 30; Rhodes, *United States Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1941*, 46; 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1923, Volume I: Proposal by the President to the Senate that the United States adhere to the protocol of signature establishing the Permanent Court of International Justice, July 1922-March 1923, 1-24.

Especially the first reservation stands out. It is in line with the administration's desire not to meddle too much in foreign affairs. The reservation illustrates the wanting of participation in these kind of organisations, but also the need to restrain from too much obligations towards the organisation.

When these reservations were incorporated by Hughes, Harding was fully on board. Harding mentioned his approval in his message to the Congress. He stressed that peaceful settlements of controversies between nations had always been one of the key principles in foreign policy. He fully supported the proposal that is created by Hughes, and he said that the Court should 'be discussed with entire candor, not by a political but by a judicial method, without pressure and without prejudice.'⁶⁷ Harding sent the proposal of Hughes to the Senate, and this started a long trajectory in the Senate with Henry Lodge introducing delaying tactics. The Senate delayed the proposal, because they feared that membership of the World Court would lead to membership of the League.⁶⁸ That is why the Senate added a new reservation to the actual four reservations Hughes already added. The Court could not 'without the consent of the United States entertain any request for an advisory opinion touching any dispute or question in which the United States has or claims an interest.'⁶⁹ This meant that the United States had to approve any request done by another country if it regarded them. The reservation illustrates the control America wanted to maintain in foreign affairs. They did not want to open the door to anyone determining conditions for them. The United States did not want to intervene with other countries, but they certainly did not want other countries meddling with their affairs.

The proposal with the five reservations was finally, on January 1926, accepted by the Senate. With all these reservations, it was surprising that the League did not immediately rejected the changed proposal of the US.⁷⁰ This emphasizes the strong desire the League had to incorporate America into their organisation. It invited President Calvin Coolidge, who succeeded Harding, to talk about these reservations. However, Coolidge rejected this invitation, and insisted that 'unless the requirements of the Senate resolution are met by the other interested nations, I can see no prospect of this country adhering to the Court.'⁷¹ This brought them in an impasse. The successor of Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, tried to break through by letting his

⁶⁷ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1923, Volume I: Message of the President of the United States to Congress, December 6, 1923, VIII.

⁶⁸ Iriye, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, 81.

⁶⁹ Congressional Record, 69th Congress, 1st session, February 2, 1927, vol. 67, 2824-25; Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*, 95.

⁷⁰ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 30.

⁷¹ Betty Glad, *Charles Evans Hughes and the Illusions of Innocence: A Study in American Diplomacy* (Urbana, Illinois, 1966), 193.

Secretary of State, Elihu Root, draft a new proposal. In this proposal the United States could withdraw from the World Court 'if American objections to an advisory opinion were overruled by other members.'⁷² The isolationists in the Senate delayed this into the 1930s. Eventually, the membership of the World Court was denied.⁷³

The support for a membership of the World Court does not correspond with the notion that the Republican administrations were isolationist in its policies. The support for membership by the administration illustrates that it was not always the administration who did not want to dive onto the international stage of politics. It was quite often the Senate who were reluctant to take the chance to join a new international justice system. Only after the amendment of the original proposal, with the certainty of the informal position of the US and the power to choose their own cases when other countries introduced their involvement, they approved the proposal. This took them two years. When the League was ready to discuss the proposal, another President sat in the White House, and he was unwilling to negotiate. The one who succeeded him, did not succeed in letting a new proposal pass. In this instant, the Senate was the force that eventually caused the membership of the World Court to fail.

The Kellogg-Briand Pact

The Kellogg-Briand Pact is an example of international relations between two countries that have a substantial impact in the world order. Aristide Briand, the minister of Foreign Affairs of France, pointed out in a statement to the United States that it benefited both countries if they would outlaw war as a national policy.⁷⁴ In a statement to the press, Briand said that 'two great democratic nations, [are] devoted to the same ideal of peace, are following the same path towards the same end.'⁷⁵ Here he was focussed on the favourable relations the two countries had. Further in the statement, he called attention to the role the United States could play on a worldly stage.

'Any engagement subscribed in the same spirit by the United States with another nation such as France would greatly contribute in the eyes of the world to broaden and strengthen the foundation upon which the international policy of peace is being raised.'⁷⁶

⁷² Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 30.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 31.

⁷⁴ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 104.

⁷⁵ 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States', 1927, Volume II: Statement Made to the Associated Press by the French Minister for Foreign Affairs (Briand), April 6, 1927, 611, 612.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 612.

To express the impact such an agreement could have, he brings the policy of peace into the equation. This was a smart move, because peace is something the United States stood for in the 1920s.⁷⁷

Briand did not create this idea of outlawing war. This was actually an American incentive, thought of by a Chicago lawyer Salmon O. Levenson. He established the American Committee of the Outlawry of War.⁷⁸ He claimed that war took place, because there was legal ground for it. States used this legal base to engage in war. Once that legal base is gone, nations are more hesitant to use war as a policy.⁷⁹ They will only use it as self-defence. Briand used this new idea to pull America closer towards involvement in European security. The initial proposal of Briand was a bilateral pact that actually was a “negative military alliance.” This would have ensured neutrality of the United States in conflicts in the future.⁸⁰ The American administration did not see a great deal in this bilateral pact, and wanted to involve multiple world powers. They believed that it ‘might make a more signal contribution to world peace by joining in an effort to obtain the adherence of all of the principal Powers of the world to a declaration renouncing war as an instrument of national policy.’⁸¹ What Miles Kahler illustrates in his article is that the administrations were quite forced to close this pact. They needed to do this with as many impact as possible on the American public. However, they had to sign the pact with minimal international commitments.⁸² To the outside world the government of Coolidge seemed international, yet, this was quite an isolationist move. War was not an instrument of national policy anymore when this pact was signed. Interfering in other countries became illegal. On the other hand, the same commitment meant surrendering some of their own freedom in national policy. This is not in line with the characteristics of unilateralism.

Briand had to comply to Kellogg’s idea of making it a multilateral agreement. He was disappointed in this outcome, as the chargé in France, Whitehouse, wrote to Kellogg. Briand saw it as a confirming agreement to their ‘ancient friendship,’ and the terms of a bilateral pact would have been more explicit than a multilateral agreement.⁸³ Briand took his loss and accepted the soft law approach. This agreement was better than no agreement at all.⁸⁴ The pact

⁷⁷ Goodall, ‘US Foreign Relations under Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover’, 64.

⁷⁸ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 32.

⁷⁹ Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*, 96.

⁸⁰ Miles Kahler, ‘Conclusion: The Causes and Consequences of Legalization’, *International Organization* 54 (2000) 3, 669.

⁸¹ ‘Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States’, 1927, Volume II: The Secretary of State to the French Ambassador, December 28, 1927, 627.

⁸² Kahler, ‘Conclusion: The Causes and Consequences of Legalization’, 669.

⁸³ ‘Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States’, 1927, Volume II: The Chargé in France (Whitehouse) to the Secretary of State, December 31, 1927, 630.

⁸⁴ Kahler, ‘Conclusion: The Causes and Consequences of Legalization’, 669.

was signed in Paris on August 27, 1928, by fifteen nations.⁸⁵ The pact did not have a sanction that was enforceable. This idea came from the Foreign Relations Committee leader, William Borah.⁸⁶ As already mentioned, his goal was keeping America out of business where they had no interests, either financial or political. Kellogg agreed with Borah, as well as Hoover, about the benefits the United States would have when they got involved in the unstable European political stage.⁸⁷ The only sanction the pact had, laid in the power of public opinion.⁸⁸ Just how the Senate appreciated it the most.

The Foreign Relations Committee, or at least Borah, got what they wanted. They had a new pact, this meant they had positive international relations with the nations that signed it, but the pact had no enforceable sanctions. Thus, the United States had no obligations towards the others, except for the fact that they could not use war as national policy any more. With the exception of self-defence. The Kellogg-Briand Pact was a step towards an American influence in European affairs. The decision to make it a multilateral agreement, was a tactical move of the American government to assure that the pact was accepted by Congress. The signing of the pact looked like an international engagement, and it was in a sense, but the isolationist views predominated.

⁸⁵ Powaski, *Toward an Entangling Alliance*, 49.

⁸⁶ Leffler, *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism*, 104.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 106.

⁸⁸ Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century*, 97.

Conclusion

The answer to the question to what extent the US-foreign policy of the 1920s could be labelled as isolationist is, as is said earlier, a tough question to answer. This study included various parties within the American government, and looked at various issues of foreign policy in the 1920s. It made clear that ambivalence was prevalent among the parties involved and in the different areas of foreign policy. Congress, with William Borah as leader of the Irreconcilables, was generally more in favour of a strictly isolationist approach. He was cautious in getting the United States involved in international organisations and treaties. He loathed the League of Nations and did everything to prevent the United States from getting involved. His approach fits within the unilateralism of Johnstone. Borah wanted to remove the United States as far as possible from the League and wanted to uphold America's freedom of action. The surprising notion about Borah was that he did encourage disarmament. Not only did he encourage it, he developed the idea of the Washington Naval Conference to limit naval armament. Even within one person, there can be conflicting interests in international politics. William Borah cannot be characterized as a pure isolationist or anti-internationalist.

The isolationist tendencies of Borah and the Senate seem to have had an impact on Secretary of State Charles Hughes. His attitude towards the Reparations Commission gives us a good illustration. The Treaty of Versailles was not ratified by the US-government, and led to the US stepping out of the Commission. They returned to the Commission only as an unofficial member, without any obligations. A similar construction was found for the League of Nations. The American participation in this League was also unofficial. In both situations the US-policy could be defined as unilateral. Unilateralism is an important characteristic of isolationism. The state insisted on being free of actions, and did not want to be restricted by multilateral treaties. This fits the definition of unilateralism.

The history of the Washington Naval Conference to limit naval armament confirms the ambivalence and complexity of the American policy in international affairs. Here the government took the role as leader of the conference, with Hughes at the head of the table. By organising the conference, the government was portrayed as a peacekeeper. In reality, the agenda of the US-government was more complicated. The main achievements were the abrogation of the alliance with Japan, and the disarmament agreement (the so-called Five Powers Treaty). For the US, the repudiation of the alliance was a condition to accept the disarmament agreement. Without the alliance, the United States was no longer obliged to intervene on Japan's behalf in cases of military attack on Japan. While the American delegates

to the Conference portrayed themselves as internationalist to the outside world, they were in fact pushing towards non-interventionism. According to Johnstone, non-interventionism is another important characteristic of isolationism. Thus, one could argue that in this specific situation the American policy was perhaps even more isolationist than internationalist.

Another example of complexity and ambivalence in American policy is the discussion concerning membership of the World Court. The Republican administration was in favour, yet the Senate was against joining the court and only wanted the US to join on specific conditions. These conditions were about to be negotiated, when a new president took office: Coolidge. As opposed to Harding Coolidge was not at all willing to negotiate as he was convinced that the Senate would not approve any proposal. A membership never transpired. The resistance of the Senate to be internationalist, caused the government to tilt towards isolationist actions.

The Senate made one huge exception: the Kellogg-Briand Pact. An important reason for the acceptance of this agreement was the absence of sanctioning mechanisms: in case of violation of the pact, the parties involved were more or less powerless. The role of Kellogg should not be underestimated here. He played a tactical game, because he dodged the bilateral proposal of Briand. The Senate would have never accepted a bilateral treaty like the one Briand proposed. What did make the Senate accept the multilateral pact was the pressure the peace movement could carry out. With this pact, the United States government showed the movement that they made it their goal to preserve the peace. The closing of the pact was quite an internationalist step for America. Both the multilateral aspect of the pact and the sacrificing of free actions, belong to an internationalist approach. Though the isolationist views of the Senate influenced the course of events, the United States did cautiously step towards an internationalist stance by the signing of a multilateral pact.

To use the three characteristics of isolationism, unilateralism, abstention, and non-interventionism, it became clearer as to how the United States positioned itself in world politics. The United States touched upon different characteristics in different situations. The usage of these characteristics have shown that the term isolationism is complicated, and that it has different layers. The international foreign policy of the United States in the 1920s was neither entirely isolationist nor entirely internationalist. There are too many different viewpoints and opinions in one government to stamp it as isolationist. In general, Congress was for an isolationist approach, and the Secretary of State had to work within those boundaries. The approach of the Presidents also differed. Harding was open-minded towards collaboration, in contrast to Coolidge who was not willing to negotiate different proposals for the World Court. Throughout the decade, the attitude of Congress shifted slightly towards a more internationalist

stance. This is best illustrated by the signing of the Kellogg-Briand Pact. The unwillingness of joining the World Court and the League by the Senate in the beginning of the decade, was replaced by a willingness to sign the pact at the end of the decade. This shift clarifies the changing of international relations at the beginning of the 1930s.

Furthermore, this study made clear that the US-government operated in different situations differently, taking into account what was thought to be feasible in a specific situation. Research also brought to the fore the role of the Senate. In some of the discussed matters the Senate was determinative. The Republican administrations had to adjust to that political playfield, which made international relations an interesting political game. For further research, I suggest looking at the archives of Congress. These archives are located in Washington DC, and I was unable to research those papers. These papers would possibly shed some more light on the thoughts of other Congressmen than Borah, and would perhaps give another sight in different viewpoints within the Senate. In addition, two different aspects of world politics could be researched. This would be the economical position of the US, and their actions concerning the military and possible interventions. The definition of isolationism that is used in this research could also be used in those areas.

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