Chapter 21

**[[THE BIG IDEA: As the United States became a major power on the world stage, what ideas and interests did policymakers seek to promote in international affairs?]]**

Before 1865, U.S. policymakers had often tried to influence Spanish, French, or British policies that they felt posed a threat to their young, fragile republic--but they understood that European military powers set the agenda. After 1865, the United States began to exercise more and more global influence—a development that left Americans divided and conflicted. The foreign policy decisions made between the 1890s and the 1910s laid the foundations for America’s foreign policy dilemmas today.

Ambiguity was often inherent in U.S. actions. In helping Cuban revolutionaries fight Spain, for example, many Americans believed they were helping a colonial people overthrow European rule, just as patriots had once done in the American Revolution. But as the United States defeated Spain, it chose to annex Hawaii and Puerto Rico, retain political interests in Cuba, and fight an extended military action in the Philippines to maintain U.S. control. Was the United States dedicated to promoting democracy and human rights--an alternative to European imperialism? If so, then why was it building an overseas empire of its own?

The contradictions of U.S. imperialism reflected conflicts at home. Many policymakers saw overseas trade and influence as remedies for the domestic conflicts brought by industrialization—an approach that didn’t require major changes to America’s own social and economic order. Foreign policy was also shaped by domestic racial policies, including disfranchisement, Jim Crow segregation, Chinese Exclusion, and dispossession of native peoples from their lands.

World War I intensified many of America’s foreign policy contradictions. Initially determined to remain neutral, Americans found themselves drawn in through economic and political entanglements. President Woodrow Wilson hoped to “make the world safe for democracy,” but at the war’s end Congress rejected his goals. Wilson’s idealism was, itself, shaped by his racial prejudices and severely limited by his allies’ desire for vengeance against Germany. World War I was a humanitarian and political catastrophe that left appalling legacies, some of which we still live with today. It also had unexpected consequences on the home front, as the U.S. government suppressed dissent and mobilized millions of workers to support the war effort—including women, and African Americans and Mexican Americans who undertook a Great Migration to the north to take up industrial jobs.