

# "Everlasting Meddling and Muddling": Isolationism and the Harding Administration's Misguidance of the American Public

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American involvement in world affairs has been extremely important in the past seventy-five years. In fact, it is hard to imagine a world without America as one of the leading powers. Her policies affect trade, military actions, and lives across the world. One important foreign affairs conference was the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-1922. The conference in Washington, D.C. resulted in three major multilateral agreements addressing disarmament, economic policy, and political quarrels in Asia.<sup>1</sup> Though the officials at the conference passed these agreements with good intentions, ultimately the Harding Administration had misguided the American public. President Warren G. Harding and his allies had promised a "return to normalcy" and relative isolation compared to the previous twenty years of American foreign policy. Yet the explicit statements in speeches and writings from these leaders were broken as America adopted a stance of independent internationalism. The Washington Naval Conference represents a major break from the promised isolationist policies, and each of the three agreements made at the conference—the Four-Power Treaty, the Five-Power Treaty, and the Nine-Power Treaty—show that Harding and his allies misguided the public with regard to his administration's foreign policy.

America grew into a major international power following the World Wars, but internationalism has not always been popular. In fact, many politicians have maintained and run on platforms of isolation and nationalist views. The internationalist foreign policy America has now had not always been prevalent throughout the country's relatively short history. The United States often attempted to stay withdrawn from world affairs throughout the first 125 years of its history, but by looking at the statements from early American leaders, one can easily see that the foreign policy enacted since the country's birth has been fluid and influenced heavily by the context surrounding America and the world. It is important to keep in mind, when looking at foreign policy, that no policy or treaty is entirely focused on

one nation. Every policy enacted has effects on multiple nations, raising the question of who should be involved in the making of policies. The United States has gone through periods of increased involvement in world affairs since 1776, depending on worldwide events. However, in the decades surrounding the turn of the Twentieth Century, America took on a more international role through imperialism.

Following World War One, many citizens wanted to leave world problems behind and focus solely on America. As history showed, America was not able to depart from the world stage effectively during the interwar period, but politicians found a way to entice voters to support them by using the promise of isolationism. Many historians agree with Harding's campaign slogan that his administration represented a "return to normalcy," but the Washington Naval Conference demonstrates that Harding was pushing America to a new normal of trying to achieve what is now referred to as *independent internationalism*. The Washington Naval Conference placed America in a position to sign three major treaties that supported or maintained its world-wide economic and military status, but the conference also helped push America into accepting a major international role.

It is important to detail the terms and definitions tied to *isolationism* as used in this project. The terms *isolationism*, *corporatism*, *multilateralism*, *unilateralism*, and *independent internationalism* are key to understanding the Harding Administration. A basic definition of *isolationism* is "a policy of national isolation by abstention from alliances and other international political and economic relations."<sup>2</sup> It is rare for countries to maintain a fully isolationist policy, but throughout American history, many American leaders have claimed that their policies were isolationist just by withdrawing from or avoiding military and political conflicts. The definition of *isolationism*, in terms of American foreign policy, from historian Foster Rhea Dulles is extensive and useful for reference. Dulles defines *traditional isolationism* as "the idea that the United States should avoid all foreign

<sup>1</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives, last modified January 20, 2009, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/id/88313.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "isolationism," accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/isolationism>.

political commitments and entanglements that might involve the Republic in foreign rivalries and foreign wars. [However], promotion of foreign trade" was not ruled to be part of isolationist policies.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, an isolationist policy was one of "aloofness and wholly independent action" meant to serve solely the United States in the best way possible.<sup>4</sup>

*Corporatism*, another useful term, is defined by Alan Cawson as "a specific socio-political process in which organizations representing monopolistic functional interests engage in political exchange with state agencies over public policy outputs which involves those organizations in a role which combines interest representation and policy implementation through delegated self-enforcement."<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the terms *multilateralism* and *unilateralism* are opposites of each other. Charles Krauthammer describes *unilateralism* as "The essence of unilateralism is that we do not allow others, no matter how well-meaning, to deter us from pursuing the fundamental security interests of the United States and the free world."<sup>6</sup> To the contrary, *multilateralism*, or *internationalism*, is defined as working with other nations to achieve policies.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, *independent internationalism* is a mixture of both unilateral and internationalism with the hopes of maintaining independence in all foreign policy actions. Joan Hoff Wilson defines the term as an "unstable assortment of unilateral and collective [international] diplomatic actions."<sup>8</sup> Overall, the definitions of *isolation* and *independent internationalism* are important to understanding how the Harding Administration misguided the public with promises of isolation but maintained a different kind of foreign policy, especially through the Washington Naval Conference.

In America, isolation was not a new idea. Thomas Paine advocated for an "independent," or isolationist, foreign policy, with the desire of having a supreme commercial economy.<sup>9</sup> John Adams' Model Treaty of 1776 "envisioned a purely commercial treaty with the French, not a binding

military alliance."<sup>10</sup> In fact, George Washington advocated for isolationism in his Farewell Address in 1796, stating "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."<sup>11</sup> He did not want America to become entangled in European affairs and alliances. Washington believed that active foreign policy and alliances would bring America into wars that the country really had no business fighting. This advice from America's first president was followed partially, but not completely, by his successors. All these expressions of isolation have the same idea in common. They wanted economic ties to world markets, but they did not want binding alliances that could draw America into wars.

America was unable to stay completely out of political and military alliances with European nations such as France, due to the Franco-American Alliance of 1778-1800, and Washington even urged America to retain its relationship with France.<sup>12</sup> The stronger and more self-sufficient America grew, the less dependent she became on European politics. Finally, in 1823, President James Monroe declared, "In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, America did maintain in large part a self-declared form of isolationism throughout the late 1700s until the late 1800s. This was an Americanized form of isolation. America maintained relationships with most nations, but she did not sign military treaties. Wars that did not help America or directly concern America did not draw citizens' interests.<sup>14</sup>

America generally stayed active around the globe, never withdrawing itself entirely from the world or its economy. It continued to develop trade with Europe, Asia, and eventually Latin America, but America did not forge any truly binding military alliances.<sup>15</sup> However, as the economic supremacy of America grew, so did the country's military.

<sup>3</sup> Foster Rhea Dulles, *America's Rise to World Power: 1898-1954* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Cawson, *Corporatism and Political Theory* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1986), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "Unilateral? Yes, Indeed," *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2002, A45.

<sup>7</sup> James A. Helis, and J. Boone Bartholomees, *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*. Report. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2014. accessed March 25, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12023.6>, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Hoff Wilson, *American Business and Foreign Policy: 1920-1933* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Justus Doenecke, "Isolationism," in *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, ed. John Whiteclay Chamber II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 341.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> George Washington, "Washington's Farewell Address, 1796," *Washington's Papers, Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library: The Avalon Project*, accessed April 15, 2020, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> James Monroe, "Monroe Doctrine, 1823," *19th Century Documents, Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library: The Avalon Project*, accessed April 15, 2020, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/monroe.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/monroe.asp).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Lerche, *Foreign Policy of the American People* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1958), 126-9.

<sup>15</sup> "United States Treaties and International Agreements: 1776-1949," Library of Congress, last modified December 31, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans.php>.

America became stronger throughout the Nineteenth Century and developed into a continental and an imperial power by the end of the 1800s. By the end of the century, the United States possessed colonies and played an important role in the makeup of the world economy and, even more importantly, the new military order.<sup>16</sup> With this, ties among the world powers formed.

Whether the politicians in America realized it or not, the economic ties and naval build-up that America underwent throughout the 1800s had a long-lasting impact on the world order and eventually pushed Harding to host the Washington Naval Conference. America was directly tied to Europe economically, but when World War One began, the United States continued to provide loans and military equipment to the belligerents.<sup>17</sup> While America was able to maintain neutrality for most of the war, the nation was trading with and lending heavily to the Allies. However, the incumbent Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, maintained during his re-election campaign that he would keep America out of the war. He even declared three months before the war began, "We need not, and we should not, form alliances with any nation in the world."<sup>18</sup> Despite the president's fervent words in 1916, Wilson brought the United States into World War One in 1917 after winning the presidential race.

Throughout twenty months in combat, America lost 100,000 soldiers. America came into the war late, but the United States forces were needed terribly and contributed greatly to the Allied victory.<sup>19</sup> America backed the war effort, but after the conflict ended, reality set in for many Americans. The Allies won the war, but America lost many men. The death of Americans in a European war led many to develop

the belief that the country needed to become isolated politically once again.<sup>20</sup>

During the period following the end of World War One, Wilson advocated strongly for America's entrance into the League of Nations. During the Paris Peace Talks, the president promoted his Fourteen Points, including open diplomacy, free trade, disarmament, and the creation of the League of Nations.<sup>21</sup> He did not want the deaths of American men to go unrecognized, and without American involvement in the League, he knew it would have little enforcement power.<sup>22</sup> However, the sentiment against American involvement in foreign affairs began to take hold across the American public.

Henry Cabot Lodge, a prominent Congressional Republican, led the push for isolationism during the late 1910s and early 1920s. In a speech to the Senate, he declared, "We would not have our country's vigor exhausted, or her moral force abated, by everlasting meddling and muddling in every quarrel, great and small, which afflicts the world."<sup>23</sup> To continue, Senator Hiram Johnson argued against intervention as well. He declared, "nobody in Europe cares a rap about the international court, . . . but many expect if the United States can be lured into it, the United States is on the way not only to the League of Nations, but to full participation in European affairs."<sup>24</sup> These were only a few of the isolationist supporters. Many others, including Smedley Butler, Charles Coughlin, and Charles Lindbergh, all supported isolationist policies during the interwar period.<sup>25</sup> With the large advocacy for isolation, a decision was made for America to remain out of the League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles. However, this did not prevent America from remaining involved economically by becoming the world's largest

<sup>16</sup> Doenecke, "Isolationism," 342.

<sup>17</sup> United States Senate, Nye Committee, *Report of the Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry, U.S. Congress, Senate, 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess.* (Washington, DC: February 24, 1936). <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/nye.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "President Woodrow Wilson's Proclamation of Neutrality, 1914," *Documentary Histories, Naval History and Heritage Command*, accessed April 18, 2020, [https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/wwi/1914/ttl-president-woodro/\\_jcr\\_content.html](https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/wwi/1914/ttl-president-woodro/_jcr_content.html).

<sup>19</sup> United States Senate, Senate Document No. 5, *Making the World "Safe for Democracy": Woodrow Wilson Asks for War*, U.S. Congress, Senate, 65<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess. (Washington, DC: April 2, 1917).

[https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/wwi/1914/ttl-president-woodro/\\_jcr\\_content.html](https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/documentary-histories/wwi/1914/ttl-president-woodro/_jcr_content.html).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander DeConde, *Isolation and Security* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1957), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, 1918," *20<sup>th</sup> Century Documents, Yale Law School Lillian*

*Goldman Law Library: The Avalon Project*, accessed April 20, 2020, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/jefinau1.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp).

<sup>22</sup> "America Isolation Cowardly and Ignoble, Declares Wilson in Armistice Day Address," 1923, *The Atlanta Constitution (1881-1945)*, Nov 11, 1, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/499173216?accountid=11945>.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, "Henry Cabot Lodge Opposes US Participation in League of Nations, 1919," *The American Catholic: Politics and Culture from a Catholic Perspective*, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.the-american-catholic.com/2019/08/18/85209/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Isolation Policy Ruining Prices, Says Underwood; Hiram Johnson Raps Foreign Entanglements: Western Senator Takes Firm Stand for U. S. Isolation; Declares U. S. Should Stay Out of World Court and the League of Nations. Senator Takes Rap at Administration; Insists Nation's Foreign Policy Should Be Decided at the Polls in the 1924 Election. Hiram Johnson for U. S. Isolation," 1923, *The Atlanta Constitution (1881-1945)*, Jul 26, 1, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/499144738?accountid=11945>.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Lowenthal, "The National Security State," in *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stanley Kutler (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996), 597.

creditor. Then, in November of 1920, Harding won the presidential election, promising normalcy and isolationism to the American public.

Harding, one of Lodge's allies in the Republican-controlled Senate, secured victory in the 1920 election by running on the campaign slogan of a "return to normalcy." A significant portion of the American people wanted to leave Europe behind, but many did not think about the long-term repercussions of leaving the problems of Europe alone (or even how to leave Europe alone). America became a leading world power following the war. It was not a simple choice to exit the world stage. Harding's Administration was marred by a one-foot-in and one-foot-out approach to foreign affairs. Americans did not want to get involved in world problems in Europe and Asia, but at the same time, the problems present in Europe and Asia directly impacted the American economy.<sup>26</sup> Harding pushed his idea of isolation out to the American people in speeches.<sup>27</sup> His statements echoed the isolationist policies that early American leaders had advocated for; however, the world scene was much different in 1920 than it was during the nation's first seventy-five years of existence. America was now a world leader, and with that position, the country had to hold the world together or else face a collapse of her economy and influence. Harding implemented a policy that alternated between traditional isolation and intervention.

Debates over American foreign policy during the interwar period started as soon as the United States began to reach agreements with other countries. Several historians take the side that America entered a more traditional isolationist period, while others propose the idea that American politicians did not return to an isolationist foreign policy. More modern historians developed terms that encompass this mixture of policy during the Harding Administration. While America did not go back to 1890s imperialism, America also did not return to 1870s isolationist policies.<sup>28</sup> One of the key books that focuses on foreign policy in the interwar period is Albert Weinberg's 1936 monograph, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansion in American History*. Weinberg was the first scholarly author to mention isolationism in a historical context. He relates isolationism to expansionism. In a way, he argues that they were connected

throughout much of American history because isolationists wanted to remain out of world affairs, while expansionists wanted to expand westward. However, the split between the two positions came in the late 1800s, when American expansionists advocated for annexing and expanding outside the continental US.<sup>29</sup> Then, following World War One, Weinberg argues that America's "return to the 'normalcy' of isolationism did not bring with it a renewal of the expansionism which had been a concomitant of isolation in the past," which supports the idea that America did in fact leave world affairs.<sup>30</sup> However, he continues, "America's political interests did lead to... marked international activity. The Four-Power Treaty of the Washington Naval Conference... actually involved [the country] in an agreement to consult with others in the event of aggression in the Pacific."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Weinberg takes a stance that America did withdraw from 1890s foreign policy, but not from world affairs.

In 1936, Benjamin Williams wrote *American Diplomacy: Policies and Practice*. In this book, Williams argues that America did not sustain true isolationist policies following Harding's election. He maintains that America changed from "isolation to cooperation" with the League of Nations in about six months following the inauguration of Harding.<sup>32</sup> In April of 1921, Harding maintained that America would not take part in the League, and many Americans were looking forward to the fall of the League.<sup>33</sup> However, as the League gained members, American interests began to be involved in meetings where they did not have representation, so "about six months after Harding's inauguration, formal notes were sent from Washington acknowledging receipt of communications from the Secretariat."<sup>34</sup> Thus, six months into "normalcy," America was not isolationist any longer. Even further, Williams argues that the Washington Naval Conference was a landmark of American international cooperation.<sup>35</sup> The conference dealt largely with disarmament and stopping a naval arms race, but it also managed political issues between Japan and China. Thus, Williams takes a stance that isolation was a very short-lived policy of the Harding Administration.

Another influential author in the historiographical debate of America isolation is Walter Lippmann. In 1943, he

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<sup>26</sup> United States Senate, *Report of the Special Committee on Investigation of the Munitions Industry*.

<sup>27</sup> Warren G. Harding, *Address on Foreign Policy and the International Court of Justice Intended for Delivery in San Francisco, California 1923*, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/329292>.

<sup>28</sup> George Quester, *American Foreign Policy: The Lost Consensus* (New York: Praeger Special Studies, 1982), 137.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1935), 454.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Williams, *American Diplomacy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1936), 265.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 266

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

wrote *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*. In this book, he argues that during the interwar period, America lacked a clear and consistent foreign policy, and this pushed America into a deadly World War Two. In turn, he does not believe that America had an isolationist policy in place. He maintains, "Larger consequences flowed from our national failure to develop a foreign policy.... American foreign relations were conducted for twenty years without any indication that the nation had any conception of its commitments. In 1922, we reduced our naval strength to a ratio which gave Japan naval superiority in the Western Pacific."<sup>36</sup> He argues that the Washington Naval Conference was extremely ignorant for America. The conference diminished American naval power while increasing American commitments to China.<sup>37</sup> Further, the conference ended the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which left Japan alone regarding alliances and led to the Japanese-German Alliance.<sup>38</sup> Lippmann sees American foreign policy or lack thereof as harmful and deadly. He does not believe that isolation was achieved during the Harding Administration.

Following these authors, a slight break from the previous arguments came to the forefront. In 1955, Dulles wrote *America's Rise to World Power: 1898-1954*. In this monograph, Dulles argues on the topic of interwar foreign policy that "American foreign policy during the 1920's represented a retreat to traditional isolationism."<sup>39</sup> Dulles goes on to declare that America did not completely withdraw from the world but refused to make any new political commitments.<sup>40</sup> However, the author then mentions the Washington Naval Conference as one of the first major moves in postwar American foreign policy. The conference dealt with political questions in Asia and disarmament.<sup>41</sup> Dulles directly contradicts the argument that America did not want to make new political commitments because the conference did that very thing between China and America. Thus, Dulles believes in American isolation, but after looking into the true actions of America, determines that isolation was not achieved.

Building on Dulles's ideas, Charles Lerche wrote *Foreign Policy of the American People* in 1958. In this book, Lerche argues, "The 1920s saw a renaissance of isolationism,... which was struggled for over the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and American entry into the League of Nations."<sup>42</sup> However, he also ends up contradicting

himself when he mentions American cooperation with the League and the Washington Naval Conference. America hid its involvement with the League, and the conference resulted in a naval treaty and political treaty.<sup>43</sup> Lerche maintains that America saw a new period of isolation, but in fact, American people saw an unsuccessful and dangerous desire to withdraw from the world.

Following Lerche's argument, Wallace Irwin's *America in the World: A Guide to U.S. Foreign Policy* was written in 1983. In the book, Irwin argues that "Most Americans were fed up with the world and its problems. Feeling secure once again behind their two great oceans and enjoying a new wave of prosperity, [Americans] chose isolation."<sup>44</sup> Irwin takes the view that American foreign policy shifted back to isolationism, but he recognizes the highly flammable situation that America forced the world into throughout the 1920s. He further states, "Had American leaders and their constituents been willing to face political facts, they might have given more attention to U.S. military power."<sup>45</sup> However, America focused optimistically on disarmament at the Washington Naval Conference. Japan kept the covenant only when it was convenient for them.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Irwin takes a more "middle of the road" approach. He recognized the idea that Americans wanted isolation, but he also demonstrates the fact that the American government remained involved in world affairs in the 1920s.

The aforementioned authors show the movement of the debate on isolationism, but with time, historians could see that Harding represented a more mixed foreign policy. Harding wanted to have one foot in and one foot out of foreign affairs, and historians developed a term to explain this policy. Modern scholars have developed several significant foreign affairs theories or ideas, including corporatism, unilateralism, and independent internationalism. Each of these ideas pertains to a different period in American foreign policy. *Corporatism* is defined by Cawson as "a specific socio-political process in which organizations representing monopolistic functional interests engage in political exchange with state agencies over public policy outputs which involves those organizations in a role which combines interest representation and policy implementation through delegated self-enforcement."<sup>47</sup> In other words, corporatism is a system in which different private entities work with the government to achieve policies. Overall, Harding's Administration does

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 40.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Dulles, *America's Rise to World Power*, 144.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>42</sup> Lerche, *Foreign Policy of the American People*, 154.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Wallace Irwin, *America in the World: A Guide to U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 41.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Alan Cawson, *Corporatism and Political Theory* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1986), 38.

not fall into this category of foreign policy, and many American historians have argued that America did not see widespread corporatism in the early twentieth century.<sup>48</sup>

Another term that modern historians use to describe foreign policy is *unilateralism*. The common debate of looking into the degree to which America should be involved in world affairs surfaces again in unilateral versus multilateral policy. Unilateralism is more of a self-centered way of forming policy. In contrast, *multilateralism*, or *internationalism*, is defined as working with other nations to achieve policies.<sup>49</sup> With respect to the Harding Administration, unilateral policy was much more predominant in Latin American economic and political issues, but America did work with other nations to develop policies such as the three major treaties of the Washington Naval Conference.

This mixture of self-centered and cooperative policies leads to the term *independent internationalism*. While the term was not used in the 1920s, the Harding administration, and many of the American politicians claiming to be isolationist, could fall under this definition. Joan Hoff Wilson defines the term as an "unstable assortment of unilateral and collective diplomatic actions."<sup>50</sup> Overall, historians have come to mark Harding's as the first administration to fall under this definition. The administration continued mixing diplomatic action in which America was present in world's affairs, but also, America did not want to enter treaties or alliances such as the League of Nations. The theme of Harding's Administration was to "heal and restore" America by protecting her economic interests across the world and keeping America out of wars.<sup>51</sup> To do this, Harding's Administration walked the fine line of independent internationalism.

The Washington Naval Conference was a keystone of this type of policy. The conference produced several key treaties that served to protect American interests around the world but also served to keep America out of wars—for the moment. The conference represented a combination of American self-centered policy-making and multilateral policy-making. The issue with adopting this policy of independent internationalism is that it directly contradicted some of the promises that Harding and his administration had made to the American public. They had promised to keep America out of worldwide issues, but the Washington Naval Conference did not live up to these assertions. The conference

put America at the forefront of disarmament issues worldwide and political battles in Asia. Rather than confirm the Harding Administration's promised isolation, the conference displayed the idea of Harding using independent internationalism to promote American interests throughout the world.

Before discussing the conference and the abandonment of the promised isolation, it is important to detail several of the key figures associated with Harding who promised the American public isolation while also taking leading positions in the Washington Naval Conference. The main figures that need to be discussed briefly are Harding himself, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, and Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes. Each of these leaders had a major role in the conference, but each of them also explicitly promised American independence from foreign issues.

To begin this discussion, Harding received the nomination for the Republican ticket in June of 1920. In his acceptance speech, he pushed across many ideas of withdrawing from the world stage so far as military and political quarrels were concerned. He maintained, "The Republicans of the Senate halted the barter of independent American eminence and influence.... Our Party means to hold the heritage of American nationality unimpaired and unsundered."<sup>52</sup> He was not willing to sacrifice American independence and heritage for the problems present across the world, especially in Europe. Even further, he declares, "We hold to our rights, and mean to... sustain the rights of this nation and our citizens alike, everywhere under the shining sun."<sup>53</sup> Harding is clearly pushing the idea that America is planning on taking a major step back from world affairs. However, he realized and even asserted that he would be willing to help achieve long-term peace if possible. This idea of helping achieve peace came with this promise: "No surrender of rights to a world council or its military alliance, no assumed mandatory, however appealing, ever shall summon the sons of this Republic to war. Their supreme sacrifice shall only be asked for America and its call of honor."<sup>54</sup> It is clear that Harding, though he was willing to work with other nations for America's economic benefit through long-term peace, was pushing a narrative of isolation and independence from European and Asian affairs in the aftermath of World War One.

In addition to Harding's nomination speech, his tone on foreign relations turned even more isolationist as the 1920 general election drew closer. Through several speeches and

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<sup>48</sup> Larry G. Gerber, "Corporatism and State Theory: A Review Essay for Historians," *Social Science History* 19, no. 3 (1995), accessed March 25, 2021. doi:10.2307/1171489, 314-15.

<sup>49</sup> Helis and Bartholomees, *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, *American Business and Foreign Policy: 1920-1933*, xvii.

<sup>51</sup> Warren G. Harding, *Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination*, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/276596>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

writings, Harding was able to signal that his administration intended to avoid “any political commitments or multilateral guarantees.”<sup>55</sup> Harding saw the 1920 election as a mandate from the American people to maintain independence from the world. Finally, in his inaugural address, he drove the point of isolation once more. In his speech, Harding stressed, “America, our America, the America built on the foundation laid by the inspired fathers, can be a party to no permanent military alliance. It can enter into no political commitments, nor assume any economic obligations which will subject our decisions to any other than our own authority.”<sup>56</sup> If one is looking only at the words of Harding’s speeches, especially his later speeches, it is apparent that America should be entering into a period of inactivity on the world stage. However, Harding did not maintain this tone when the opportunity appeared to host a naval disarmament conference. Harding allowed the conference to occur. He most likely had good intentions for hosting the conference; however, the conference steered American toward the path of independent internationalism rather than toward isolationism.

A major ally to the Harding Administration was Henry Cabot Lodge. He was yet another leader who promised American independence from foreign affairs, and as a senior member of the Senate, he held a position of influence on foreign affairs for the Harding Administration. Therefore, his promises of “freedom” from world problems were breached with the Washington Naval Conference.<sup>57</sup> Many of his speeches relay his tone toward foreign affairs, and two of his major speeches tell of his isolationist attitude. In 1919, slightly before Harding became a candidate for the Presidency, Lodge gave a speech on the League of Nations. Quite vehemently, he asserted his disdain for internationalism and the League of Nations:

But I am certain that we can do it best by not putting ourselves in leading strings or subjecting our policies and our sovereignty to other nations. The independence of the United States is not only more precious to ourselves, but to the world, than any single possession.... But it is well to remember that we are dealing with nations, every one of which has a direct individual interest to serve, and there is grave danger in an unshared idealism.... But an

American I was born; an American I've remained all my life. I can never be anything else but an American, and I must think of the United States first.... For if the United States fails, the best hopes of mankind fail with it. I have never had but one allegiance; I cannot divide it now. I have loved but one flag and I cannot share that devotion and give affection to the mongrel banner invented for a league. Internationalism, illustrated by the Bolshevik and by the men to whom all countries are alike, provided they can make money out of them, is to me repulsive. National I must remain and in that way I, like all other Americans, can render the amplest service to the world. The United States is the world's best hope, but if you fetter her in the interest through quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her powerful good, and endanger her very existence.... Beware how you trifle with your marvelous inheritance — this great land of ordered liberty. For if we stumble and fall, freedom and civilization everywhere will go down in ruin.<sup>58</sup>

It is quite clear that Lodge did not want to enter any binding alliance, and he appeared to be taking on a strong stance of isolationism. However, once Harding was in office, the administration left this isolationist stance in order to pursue a path of independent internationalism.

Even further, Lodge gave the keynote address at the 1920 Republican Convention. In this speech, he maintained, “As we studied [the League of Nations,] ...we found that it dragged us not only into every dispute and every war in Europe and in the rest of the world, but that our soldiers and sailors might be forced to give their lives in quarrels not their own at the bidding of foreign governments.”<sup>59</sup> He was completely against the League because he felt that it represented a binding military alliance. This was the view of many Americans, and the 1920 election showed politicians that a majority of voters did not want to be involved in European and Asian affairs. Even further, in this same speech, Lodge declared, “We must all fight side by side to keep safe and untouched the sovereignty, the independence, the welfare of the United States.”<sup>60</sup> Lodge, much like Harding, covered

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<sup>55</sup> Arnold Offner, *The Origins of the Second World War: American Foreign Policy and World Politics, 1917-1941* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Warren G. Harding, “Inaugural Address, 1920,” *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States, Bartleby*, March 28, 2021, [www.bartleby.com/124/](http://www.bartleby.com/124/).

<sup>57</sup> “Full Text of Senator Lodge’s Speech Sounding Republican Convention Keynote,” 1920, *The New York Times*, June 9, 4,

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1920/06/09/118326607.html?pageNumber=4>.

<sup>58</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, “League of Nations Speech, 1919,” State Historical Society of Iowa, March 20, 2021, <https://iowaculture.gov/sites/default/files/history-education-pss-war-cabot-transcription.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> “Full Text of Senator Lodge’s Speech Sounding Republican Convention Keynote,” *The New York Times*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

his tracks by stating that America would not be isolated from human suffering. He was sure to say that America would help suffering foreign powers "in our own way, freely and without constraint from abroad. With no outside help since the Revolution, we have come to where we are today. We shall march on and not neglect our duty to the world."<sup>61</sup> He was a staunch supporter of isolation and national sovereignty from the rest of the world in nearly every aspect of the word, except when it came to helping human lives and economic transactions. By pushing a narrative of isolation and contributing to a policy of independent internationalism with the Washington Naval Conference, he played a key role in the misguidance of the American public during the Harding Administration.

Another major figure tied to the Harding Administration was Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes. In 1919 and 1920, Hughes took the position that American should join the League of Nations on amended terms. However, when he took control of the State Department, he changed his views on foreign policy.<sup>62</sup> This change suggests the influence Harding had on him. Harding wanted to push an agenda of isolation and normalcy, and he needed his Secretary of State to agree with him. In 1921, Hughes "turned his back on the League and its related activities."<sup>63</sup> Thus, he effectively told the public that he did not support internationalism and that American foreign policy would be that of Harding's promised 'normalcy.' However, this isolationist policy did not stand up against the Washington Naval Conference. Hughes was the Secretary of State, so he was the one who issued the invitations to the conference in the first place.<sup>64</sup> He was an integral part of America's hosting and thus becoming a central figure in disarmament, economic, and political issues discussed in the conference. Thus, each of these major figures of the Harding Administration all promised the American people a new policy of 'normalcy' and relative isolation from world issues. However, the occurrence of the Washington Naval Conference quickly wiped this promise aside. The conference may have had good intentions, but it altered American foreign policy to take on multilateral agreements and enter what historians called the first independent internationalist administration.

After assuming the presidency, Harding allowed the conference to come to Washington to discuss several pressing issues across the world. The Washington Naval Conference of 1921-1922 was a key moment in America's assuming a leading position in a major worldwide debate of disarmament.

Harding did maintain a desire to assure long-term peace, and he felt that disarmament would positively contribute to this goal. Consequently, he allowed the conference to call nine world powers to Washington to discuss several issues including disarmament, economics in Asia, and political disputes in Asia. The conference in general constituted a major step away from Harding's promised isolationist policies, but the treaties signed at the conference each help illuminate the actual policy that the Harding Administration enacted. As a result of the conference, three major agreements were signed: the Four-Power Treaty, the Five-Power Treaty, and the Nine-Power Treaty. Each of these agreements shows independent internationalist concepts as opposed to isolationist policies, and by looking back at each of these agreements, historians can see the lack of promised isolationist policies.

The first of the major treaties to be signed at the conference was the Four-Power Treaty. This multilateral agreement had two major clauses that entangled the signers into joint conferences and possibly joint action against foreign aggressors:

The High Contracting Parties agree as between themselves to respect their rights in relation to their insular possessions and insular dominions in the region of the Pacific Ocean. If there should develop...a controversy arising out of any Pacific question and involving their said rights which is not satisfactorily settled by diplomacy and is likely to affect the harmonious accord now happily subsisting between them, they shall invite the other High Contracting Parties to a joint conference to which the whole subject will be referred for consideration and adjustment. If the said rights are threatened by the aggressive action of any other Power, the High Contracting Parties shall communicate with one another fully and frankly in order to arrive at an understanding as to the most efficient measures to be taken, jointly or separately, to meet the exigencies of the particular situation.<sup>65</sup>

The first clause does provide a way for America to retain independence in the Pacific because it protects the rights of American property in the Pacific. However, in order to protect business interests, America had to be willing to engage in foreign commitments and relationships, so the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Offner, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 52.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives.

<sup>65</sup> *Insular Possession and Dominions in the Pacific (Four-Power Treaty)*, 43 Stat. 1646, Treaty Series 669 (Washington, DC: December 13, 1921), <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000002-0332.pdf>.



independence of action could easily be stripped away if violations to the treaty occurred. Harding had the desire to protect American business ventures worldwide, and this treaty worked toward that goal.<sup>66</sup>

The first clause is where the independence idea ends. The rest of the treaty entangles America and the other signees into mutual agreements. In the Four-Power Treaty, the United States, France, Britain, and Japan agreed to "consult with each other in the event of a future crisis in East Asia before acting. This treaty replaced the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1902, which had been a source of some concern for the United States."<sup>67</sup> Following World War One, Japan became a threat to American possessions in the Pacific, but because of the 1902 agreement between Britain and Japan, if the United States and Japan entered a conflict, then Britain might be obligated to join Japan against the United States. By ending that treaty and creating a Four-Power agreement, the countries involved ensured that none would be obligated to engage in a conflict, but a mechanism would exist for discussions if a conflict emerged.<sup>68</sup> This seems like a good plan, but the mechanism for discussion led America to sign more multilateral agreements to relieve disputes.

In actuality, the Four-Power Treaty reduced American power in the Pacific, but it "enlarged her commitments" in the case of arising problems in Asia.<sup>69</sup> If controversy developed in the Pacific and could not be settled diplomatically, then the powers in the treaty were invited to a conference to settle the dispute. This placed the United States into a situation in which international problems needed to be dealt through the creation of additional multilateral agreements. Furthermore, if any of the powers of this treaty were threatened or attacked, then each of the powers would communicate and possibly take joint action. Joint action did not always mean military action, but it placed the signees in a weak alliance system that could pull America into a war that did not have a direct American cause or effect. Therefore, the treaty did help to protect existing American possessions in the Pacific, but the agreement also placed America in a position of high commitments in the case of engagements in Asia. This treaty exemplifies all the points of an independent internationalist administration. The agreement did protect

American independence with respect to existing possessions, but it also linked America to the other signees in the case of a conflict. The agreement maintained American-focused ideas and multilateral ideas, which is the basis of independent internationalism.

In addition to the Four-Power Treaty, five of the conference attendees also signed the Five-Power Treaty. This was the main treaty that the naval conference used to focus on disarmament. Overall, the attendees intended for the treaty to halt the naval race among the United States, Great Britain, and Japan. The Five-Power Treaty proclaimed, "The Contracting Powers agree to limit their respective naval armament as provided in the present Treaty."<sup>70</sup> From there, the document went on to list the limits and regulations for naval ships. Two of the most important stipulations of the agreement were the agreed-upon ship ratio and the loophole that led to another naval arms race. The conference adopted the 5:5:3 limits, which meant Japan could have three ships to every five American and British ships. The key reason why the United States and Britain required higher tonnage allowances was because both nations maintained two-ocean navies.<sup>71</sup> It is also important to note that the agreement applied only to ships of tonnage greater than 10,000 tons. Thus, this opened a loophole that Britain and Japan exploited. Due to the tonnage limits, the cruiser class ships were not regulated or restricted, so following the conference, a new naval race began.<sup>72</sup> This new race eventually led to another naval conference.

Another article of this multilateral agreement recognized the status quo of America, British, and Japanese bases in the Pacific. However, the agreement limited expansion of fortification in the Pacific, which endangered American possessions in much of the Pacific.<sup>73</sup> The treaty seemed to protect American-held territory in the Pacific, but it did not provide for an enforcement program. America was determined to remain out of a war if possible, so the agreement did not hold weight if nations were not willing to police Japan and Great Britain.<sup>74</sup> Japan followed the treaties only if they were "convenient for them," which was quite obvious as time moved forward. Japan did not follow the terms laid out in the Five-Power Treaty, eventually violating

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<sup>66</sup> Harding, *Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination*.

<sup>67</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives.

<sup>68</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 41.

<sup>70</sup> *Limitation of Naval Armament (Five-Power Treaty)*, 43 Stat. 1655, Treaty Series 671 (Washington, DC: February 6, 1922), <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000002-0351.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives.

<sup>72</sup> Brian McKercher, "Wealth, Power, and the New International Order: Britain and the American Challenge in the 1920s," *Diplomatic History* 12, no. 4 (1988): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24911782>, 425.

<sup>73</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives.

<sup>74</sup> Dulles, *America's Rise to World Power*, 153.

it as they expanded into American-held possessions.<sup>75</sup> Even further, the treaty did not protect the US Navy, but instead, it gave Great Britain a superior navy to the overall American Navy and Japan a superior navy in the Western Pacific.<sup>76</sup> It essentially hurt America's ability to protect and preserve her businesses and possessions in the Pacific if Japan did not hold up its part of the agreement.<sup>77</sup> Many leaders in the Harding Administration championed this treaty, but it did not truly help America in the long or short term, and it represented a major multilateral agreement that eventually led to problems in the Pacific.

The Five-Power Treaty represented a break from the promised isolationist policy almost entirely. America pledged to halt expansion in the Pacific and limited the growth of its navy, but the treaty did little to protect US interests. The treaty put many American possessions within the gun sights of Japan with no protection other than Japan's signature.<sup>78</sup> One part of traditional American isolation (at least as embodied by the Monroe Doctrine) was the fact that economic interests would be protected, but this treaty made that extremely difficult. Also, the lack of enforcement power made the agreement much less effective. The treaty represented internationalism since it was a multilateral agreement, and it did officially bind the signees to the treaty, even if it was not followed or enforced. Thus, the Five-Power Treaty was another example of the Harding Administration's enacting independent internationalism as a policy. The treaty enacted multilateralism, but it did not necessarily bind America to police the agreement; therefore, the nation would not be drawn into a war simply because the treaty was broken. This fact hurt the pact and essentially made the Pacific a free-for-all for Japan because America relinquished a great deal of Pacific power. The Four-Power Treaty was meant to protect the possessions that America had in the Pacific, but without a policing power, neither treaty was strongly enforceable. The Five-Power Treaty was yet another example of the Harding Administration's pushing for independent internationalism over the promised isolationist policies.

The last major agreement signed at the Washington Naval Conference was the Nine-Power Treaty. This treaty internationalized America's "Open-Door" policy in China. The pact was meant to stabilize political and economic tensions in China, but with time, this agreement became unenforceable like the other two because of its lack of

policing to ensure that all powers abided by the terms. The contract declared:

The Contracting Powers, other than China, agree: To respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity of China; To provide the fullest and most unembarrassed opportunity to China to develop and maintain for herself an effective and stable government; To use their influence for the purpose of effectually establishing and maintaining the principle of equal opportunity for the commerce and industry of all nations throughout the territory of China; To refrain from taking advantage of conditions in China in order to seek special rights or privileges which would abridge the rights of subjects or citizens of friendly States, and from countenancing action inimical to the security of such States.<sup>79</sup>

The agreement promised that all the signatories would "respect the territorial integrity of China... and affirmed the importance of equal opportunity for all nations doing business with China."<sup>80</sup> Also, the treaty maintained that China would not discriminate against any country seeking business ventures in the nation. However, the enforcement policy for this treaty was much like that for the Four-Power Treaty, in which the powers would call a meeting in the case of a violation of its terms.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the treaty lacked a strong method to ensure all powers followed the agreement because the threat of a meeting was not a strong enough punishment to strong Japan's territorial expansion.

While the internationalization of the Open-Door Policy seemed like a beneficial development for America, it could be helpful only if the powers of the treaty showed integrity. However, Japan was quick to exploit terminology in the agreement. Japan used the term "security" in the agreement to give themselves the reservation, or freedom of action, to expand into China throughout the interwar period. In other words, Japan "was determined to obtain, in a multilateral treaty, a recognition of their interests in China and to reserve her freedom of action in Manchuria."<sup>82</sup> This reservation presented itself in explicitly in Manchuria. If Japan wanted an area, then they declared the land integral to their national security in order to bypass the agreement.

<sup>75</sup> Sadao Asada, "Japan's "Special Interests" and the Washington Conference," *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 1 (1961): doi:10.2307/1846262, 64.

<sup>76</sup> Dulles, *America's Rise to World Power*, 139.

<sup>77</sup> Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy*, 40.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>79</sup> *Principles and Policies Concerning China (Nine-Power Treaty)*, 44 Stat. 2113, Treaty Series 723 (Washington, DC: February 6,

1922), <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/must000002-0375.pdf>.

<sup>80</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives.

<sup>81</sup> "The Washington Naval Conference, 1921-1922," U.S. Department of State Archives.

<sup>82</sup> Asada, "Japan's "Special Interests" and the Washington Conference," 62.

Japan's policy was contradicted between their outward subscription to the Nine-Power Treaty and their inner reservation of action in Manchuria. Japan's special interests of expansion took hold over the next decade, and "the Japanese faithfully observed the Nine-Power Treaty only as long as they did not feel it necessary to resort to that 'reservation.' After 1931, Nipponese legalists attempted to rationalize an aggressive policy by invoking the right to 'security,' while ignoring all the other features of the Nine-Power Treaty which proved inconvenient to them."<sup>83</sup> Thus, the signees of the treaty did not formulate an enforcement strategy, and Japan was able to bypass many of the limitations of the treaty when they felt the need.

Many American and world leaders went into the deliberations of this treaty with good intentions to stop any future conflicts regarding economic and political tensions in China. However, from the American perspective, the path was once again a policy of independent internationalism rather than strict isolationism. The policy did attempt to protect America's economic interests in China through the Open-Door policy. However, this was done with a multilateral agreement that grouped nine powers together in a treaty that could meet as a group only to address issues that arose whenever a country violated the terms of the agreement. The Nine-Powers Treaty did maintain America's independence of action in the case of one of the powers not upholding the treaty, but this made the policy unenforceable. Thus, the Nine-Power Treaty was another example of the Harding Administration's seeking independent internationalism and not isolationism.

All in all, the Washington Naval Conference was a prime example of the Harding Administration's implementing an independent internationalist policy as opposed to the promised isolationist policy. Not only was this a direct lie to the American voters, but a major issue also arose when America attempted to enforce this foreign policy strategy. Each of these treaties lacked enforcement power because America desired to maintain independence of action in the case that any terms were broken. This did keep America out of conflicts in Asia for a short time, but her possessions and rights were slowly taken over by Japan. By taking a mixed approach toward foreign policy, America increased her overseas commitments but reduced her overseas power and authority. The long-term significance of implementing independent internationalism was not necessarily the treaties signed at the conference, but rather the implications that the conference had for the future. It placed America in the position to take a more direct approach towards internationalism. America was already in a position of power, but internationalism put America in the position of supreme

power. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, America maintained an independent internationalist policy, but with time, the lack of enforcement powers of treaties forced America and other nations to take stands against foreign powers. Within twenty years of the Harding Administration's acceptance of independent internationalism, America was no longer independent from action. America went on the path of internationalism and has not truly been able to withdraw from the problems of the world since the end of the Second World War. Harding's Administration misguided the public with promises of isolation, but the independent internationalism that they implemented eventually led America to adopt a much more international and multilateral approach to foreign affairs.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 70.

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