

## In what sense, if any, was the United States a world power by 1914?

At the time the European powers went to war in 1914, the United States resumed its long-treasured place on the sidelines of combat. As had been the case in all previous wars, the continuing retreat behind the cover of the Monroe Doctrine kept America away from the tortuous diplomacy which marked European affairs. In this sense, was America truly a world power? Certainly the Monroe Doctrine prohibited American Presidents the opportunity, even if they had wanted to use it, of involving the nation in world politics in this section of the Eastern Hemisphere. Yet by 1914 the United States had proved that its voice carried weight and the muscle to back this up. What then does 'world power' status mean in this context? In one area, a world power could be measured by what it represented - its effect on the world economy and the strength in non-military terms. If this is the measure, then the position of the United States was undoubtedly stronger than if we ask what weight lay behind its diplomacy. Yet even there we have to distinguish between the influence its diplomats could wield in the negotiations she took part in to the total output of American diplomacy in all situations. In other words America remained very largely aloof from the workings of world power, yet when she entered the lists, she was accorded greater and greater respect. American foreign policy remained very limited, but where she felt she had extra-territorial interests, she acted with all the confidence due to a prosperous and decisive power.

Economically, the United States was growing in strength year on year, both in absolute terms and relative to the rest of the world. In 1913 for example, the United States accounted for one third of the world's industrial production, a figure which had grown very rapidly over the previous generation. Indeed over this time, her relative strength was increasing impressively as could be shown by that fact that in 1890 she accounted for only 3.9% of manufacturing goods - yet by 1913 this had grown to 11%<sup>1</sup>. If one bears in mind that this increase must spell a corresponding relative decrease on the part of the existing European industrialised states, the change in the balance of power can be clearly seen. However, the USA's share of the fastest-growing sectors of the world economy was far higher than the 11% outlined above. 25% of international metal production was based in America, as were 25% of machinery sales and 20% of sales of transportation equipment.<sup>2</sup> This rapid change in the strength of the American economy served also to increase American economic ties with other parts of the world, especially in the relatively close new markets in Latin America. American trade with Mexico for example increased nearly tenfold from the \$7m in 1860 to the \$63m in 1900. As Secretary of State Frelinghuysen had said, the expansion of American trade overseas was 'opens the markets of the west coast of South America to our trade and gives us at our doors a customer able to absorb a large portion of those articles which we produce in return for products we cannot profitably raise.'<sup>3</sup> Yet this expansion did not significantly alter US foreign policy, except that business interests emphasised the exclusive nature of the Monroe Doctrine. Reciprocity agreements for example with Cuba and other Latin American countries, were designed to ensure that business ties with the United States would not be disturbed by European companies. They were not examples of a foreign policy which was becoming more active or which was being given extra emphasis in Washington. Indeed, foreign markets were largely irrelevant to American companies, such that the value of imports into America steadily decreased throughout the post-Civil War period. In 1869, the United States imported 14% of its manufactured goods, yet only 5.9% in 1909.<sup>4</sup> This figure shows not only the strength of the US domestic market but also the fact that she remained self-sufficient - a factor counting against an active foreign policy. The divergence

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<sup>1</sup> Becker *America adjusts to World Power*

<sup>2</sup> Becker *America adjusts to World Power*

<sup>3</sup> La Feber *The New Empire*

<sup>4</sup> Becker *America adjusts to World Power*

between American and European views on this subject can best be seen by contrasting speeches first by Joseph Chamberlain when he said that 'if it were possible by the stroke of a pen to reduce the British economy to merely the United Kingdom, a half of the working men of this country would find themselves out of a job.'<sup>5</sup> Justin S Morill, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said on the other hand that 'The time is long past when nations can be enormously enriched by any excessive profits upon foreign trade... the home market is the only one of value over which any nation now has absolute control.'<sup>6</sup> Certainly it is true that there was only a very small number of American companies who had any significant interests in export markets. It is noticeable that in 1913 81% of exports came from sectors dominated by huge industrial combinations e.g. US Steel and Havemeyer sugar. Although these corporations exerted disproportionate political influence, it is clear that there were too many discouragements to smaller producers - invariably only the largest operations such as Singer Sewing Machine or General Electric could afford to maintain costly foreign distribution networks - while the generally high prices of American industry meant that European firms could undercut them in most areas of the world except perhaps Latin America, where proximity reduced transportation costs. Even taking account of this, the US in many ways remained a newcomer to the international stage. In 1883 the UK produced 37.1% of world manufactured goods to the USA's 3.4%. Even accounting for her relative decline, the fact that in 1899 the USA produced 9.8% and 11% in 1913 could by no means overtake it.<sup>7</sup> American attempts to assert her economic presence were not helped by the virtual disappearance of her merchant marine from carrying nearly 65% of her exports in 1861 to less than 10% in 1898 - again British shipping profited mostly from this shortfall.<sup>8</sup> A Chilean clerk in Valparaiso answered 'American steamer? I didn't know the Americans had any steamers. I never saw one.'<sup>9</sup> This fact certainly coloured the necessity for allowing ships of all nations free passage through the Panama Canal when the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty was concluded in 1901 - if this was not so, American exports would have suffered at least as much as that of other nations. Yet the key fact which prevented any possible attempts to exert an active foreign and economic policy towards Latin America remained the sheer weight of investment already in the continent from especially British sources. Despite attempts to exclude Europeans from the area by means of reciprocity treaties with 'most-favoured nation' clauses - treaties which regularly failed to win support even in the Senate - the economic capital of South America remained not Washington but London. In this respect the United States was an economic power, but by no means dominant even in 1914 South America. With the need to finance the war effort in Europe, British investment was withdrawn from the region in the following years, allowing the US to replace her - however this process was not a result of US policy but rather the pressing needs of the British government.

Strategically, the United States in this period was becoming much more of a global power, especially in her search for bases in the South Pacific. The acquisition of naval emplacements such as Pago Pago in Samoa, marked a policy towards the status of the Pacific which did not exist in previous generations of American policy-makers. The rapid advance into the Pacific was however much greater in this period, with the acquisition of parts of Samoa in 1878, and the Philippines and Hawaii in 1898. Yet the purpose of these bases was for the most part entirely negative - that the United States took them before they fell into the hands of a 'hostile power', which in practice could only be Britain or Germany. Henry Cabot Lodge best expressed the theory behind this strategic expansion when he worried aloud about why the British had a naval yard in the Bermudas: it was not because they were short of bases, but because it is within 400

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<sup>5</sup> Healy *US Expansionism*

<sup>6</sup> Pletcher *Growth & Diplomatic Adjustment*

<sup>7</sup> Pletcher *Growth & Diplomatic Adjustment*

<sup>8</sup> Pletcher *Growth & Diplomatic Adjustment*

<sup>9</sup> Pletcher *Growth & Diplomatic Adjustment*

miles of New York. Thus the necessity to maintain a coaling station in Samoa and the continued occupation of the Philippines after 1898. The practically negligible economic ties between the US and these islands - especially the Philippines - made their continued occupation a purely strategic matter. Yet their status was essentially negative in that they could also be used to discourage foreign occupations around them. It was no coincidence then that the United States became more interested in having an Open Door policy towards China when they had bases only a few hundred miles from the Chinese coastline. Likewise with the construction of the Panama Canal they possessed the strategic point which allowed them to exert maximum influence on both the Atlantic and Pacific situations, and to further the Monroe Doctrine - especially with Theodore Roosevelt's corollary of 'the exercise of an international police power.' Yet one must not imagine that this alone qualified America to claim world power status - her bases were mostly merely coaling stations. Pago Pago was hardly a Gibraltar or Hong Kong, while the mouth of the Pearl River was not even dredged until twenty years after Pearl Harbour was given to the US Navy.

In military terms, the stunning set of victories over the Spanish in 1898 apparently launched the United States into the forefront of world powers in purely military terms. The American Navy could no longer be the butt of the jokes such as that from Oscar Wilde, when it had made the Spanish into target practice. Admittedly the Spanish fleet was antique and completely lacking in logistical support but the impact of the American victory was large. In spite of this, the use of military power disguised the fact that the New Navy was almost entirely confined to home waters - the military presence in places like Valparaiso was by no means the modern force the United States possessed. However, the military force which America possessed did allow considerable leverage over conquered areas. For example the Platt Amendment extorted from the new Cuban government the American right to intervene if Cuban independence was threatened. Yet the United States was conspicuous in not using its military force wherever possible. After 1898, for example, there were no military flashpoints until Wilson send his war message to Congress in 1917. Even before that, military force was rarely used as an item of foreign policy per se. The annexation of Hawaii in 1893 was withdrawn after it was found that the use of force to displace the Hawaiian queen was illegally carried out by the US minister. Both there and in Cuba five years later, the use of American military force came at the active instigation of local elements, be they the Hawaiian Annexation Club or the Cuban junta against the Spanish colonial rulers. The attack on Manila Bay in 1898 left McKinley in an embarrassing political position since it left him with an archipelago which the US had no use or desire to keep. In any case it soon became clear that American military power was greatly inferior to most of the European and indeed Japanese powers with whom they were dealing. In 1897, for instance, the Asiatic Squadron of the US Navy was woefully undermanned - with only one battleship in its fleet and no proper base from which to operate.

In terms of American diplomacy, this rarely made a great deal of difference, since the Monroe Doctrine was a broadly accepted principle in international diplomacy, even with Theodore Roosevelt's corollary allowing the United States to act as an international police force. There was no opposition among the European nations for example when the US Senate passed the Platt Amendment, even though it denied their rights to participate in Cuba. In dealing with European powers, Britain in particular, most disputes were settled amicably, including most notably the long-standing dispute over sealing rights off the Alaskan coastline. The peaceful settlement of disputes such as this and the Venezuelan affair did much to stabilise relations between the United States and the European powers in the Americas, and in the Pacific, it was also noticeable that deals could be made such as that regarding Samoa between the USA, Germany and Britain. Fundamentally, this could be that all of the colonial powers shared the same interests as the United States in maintaining the Pacific status quo as much as possible, which is why they acquiesced so eagerly in the Open Door policy as regards China. 2500 American troops formed

part of the international response to the Boxer rebellion of 1900. Theodore Roosevelt played a significant part in the Algeciras Conference in 1907. In this way it was clear that if the United States decided to play its part in the international diplomatic scene, it would be welcomed with great respect - as long as the US adopted the same attitude as the Europeans that carving up spheres of influence in countries such as China was the right policy. However, American diplomacy found itself to be clumsy in many cases, such as the aftermath of the increased tariffs, such as McKinley's in 1890 - which directly led to the coming to power of an anti-American queen in Hawaii. The reciprocity treaties which in the words of the State Department's John Foster 'will be annexing Cuba in the most desirable way' caused a great deal of bad feeling thanks to the 'most-favoured nation' clauses which appeared to prejudice the recipient country's chances of negotiating favourable deals with other countries. In negotiations with Colombia over an isthmian canal, the United States was extremely fortunate to benefit from a revolt creating the Republic of Panama. Even when dealing with more developed nations, the US allowed tensions to increase between themselves and Japan in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. Attempted segregation of Japanese immigrant children in San Francisco schools in 1906 for example led to a souring of relations, continued under Taft and Wilson such that Roosevelt was compelled to write that 'If the Japanese choose to follow a course of conduct to which we are adverse, we cannot stop it unless we are prepared to go to war.'<sup>10</sup> This was an unthinkable course of action for a highly sceptical public who contained a great number of anti-imperialists and isolationists loyal to the spirit of Washington's Farewell Address. Even Brooks Adams, often cited as one of the prophets of expansion, said in 1898 'I am in despair to have this silly business forced on us, where we can gain neither glory nor profit'<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, though the trade figures would suggest that America was certainly a world power of the highest order by the outbreak of war in 1914, she certainly did not regard herself as being a power in the mould of the European powers. Her claim to power rested in what the US represented and was rather than what she did or achieved on the diplomatic front. She did not attempt to call herself a world power inasmuch as America did not attempt to use her power across the world - the Eastern Hemisphere was not her concern - nor if possible to use her power at all. Domestic issues, not least the racial makeup of her population, prevented America making any firm ties into the international alliance system, while much of her history counselled against dabbling in overseas affairs at all. By 1914 therefore she was a leading power only by her status as one of the richest and economically strongest nations. Her strategic and military position remained insignificant compared to the Europeans - even in the Pacific - and it is only four years later in the context of a devastated and bankrupt Europe that her predominance became clearly visible.

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<sup>10</sup> Becker *America adjusts to World Power*

<sup>11</sup> Field *American Imperialism*