

*Responsibility print*

THE NATURE OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY  
Pitman B. Potter (21 Am. Journal of Int. Law 70)

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"What the world in its turn has thought of American policies may best be discovered by investigating the fate which they have met when launched in the arena of international politics. Have other nations resisted these policies and have they resisted them successfully? Or have our policies been accepted by the nations, and, if so, for what reasons - because of our power or because of the justice inherent in, or general advantages to be obtained from acceptance of, our views?

"The fact of the matter is that in most cases the separate items of American foreign policy have been taken up and incorporated into modern international law in very nearly their original form. Directly or indirectly the United States of America has written much of the law of international relations which now governs the older states of Europe, where that law originated, and the very different states of far distant Asia.

"Thus the policies of the United States on Nationality and Recognition have been adopted by the community of nations substantially intact. All of the items of our policy regarding free seas in time of peace are law today, and prior to the World War our policies for free seas in war had very nearly attained complete adoption and ratification by even the great naval Powers. So for the policies of the reception of alien merchants and the open door, in principle at least. So for the whole great subject of neutrality and neutral rights, an American invention and creation almost in its entirety.

"Certain American policies are only now coming to success in the international field. Such are the policies regarding demilitarization and disarmament, the suppression of the practice of territorial conquest, and the whole idea of international administration, arbitration, conference, and federation. The relatively simpler proposals of diplomatic reform, reduction of rank and ceremonial, equality of treatment, had already been carried out more successfully. Even though it has taken time, however, the world finally possesses, and American policy gave them to the world, a League of Nations and a World Court.

"There is no need to go into this matter in greater detail. The ratification of the Monroe Doctrine in the League Covenant, the application of the mandate system, invented in its present form in 1906 by Roosevelt and Root, to colonial territories under the League, as well as other items, might be added. But the situation may be summarized in a few words with little inaccuracy: the foreign policies of the United States, barring one or two exceptions of detail, have been adopted by the nations and incorporated into international law for general application. Certainly this is true of American policies as it is true of the foreign policies of no other nation in history. International law beyond what it was in 1789 is largely a digest of American foreign policies and activities.

"Moreover, these American policies have been taken up into general international practice by the free will and consent of the nations. In 1789 the law of nations ran counter to American views, and the nations of Europe resisted the American innovations at first - as witness the events of 1793, 1798 and 1812, among others; hence the victory for American principles has been no empty victory won in the absence of any criticism or resistance. But the nations finally yielded when they did yield not because compelled to do so by American military or economic power. Most of our victories in this field, indeed, were won before we had developed such military or naval power as would have supported any attempt to law down the law to other nations. Most of our victories were won while America was regarded precisely as a country where ideas and words and aspirations, but not threats, took the place of information and facts and power in international dealings. The interesting thing is that the ideas and the words and the aspirations won out. And they have won out to an extent which indicates the presence of some powerful cause at work under the surface of the whole historic movement which has not yet been clearly revealed. Why this universal voluntary acceptance of what were originally nothing more or less than the peculiar policies of the United States of America?

"With this stage reached we come face to face with the central problem concerning the nature of American foreign policy. That problem may be stated thus: Granted that such foreign policies have been more or less deliberately adopted by the United States as serve its own national needs and interests, how does it happen that those policies have been capable of being cast, and quite spontaneously have been cast, in terms of general legal and governmental principles concerning international relations at large, so that they have plainly appeared to be non-competitive and even conducive to the promotion of the welfare of the nations of the world as a whole, as is shown by their acceptance by other nations and incorporation into general international law, in contrast to the opportunist competitive concrete political aims of the European states? What is there, or has there been, in the historic position of the United States in the world of nations which has produced this situation, quite apart from any considerations of motives or purposes, ideas or ideals?"