SUPPORTERS ARGUE
The United States has been in a state of perpetual war over the past decade, and that cycle must end. Critics deride anyone who opposes those wars as "isolationist," when, in reality, they favor extensive peaceful relationships with other countries. Because most people in the United States do not bear the burden of fighting the nation’s wars, they are more willing to support those wars. If such people held isolationist views, the United States would be able to maintain a more peaceful presence in the world.

OPPONENTS ARGUE
It is impossible for the United States to remain truly isolated militarily from the affairs of other countries. The country has a moral imperative to play a leadership role in world events, helping to spread freedom and democracy. Every time the United States has avoided dealings with other countries, disaster has resulted.
facing the administration of George Washington (1789–97), the first president, was whether the U.S. should become involved in conflicts between England and France or remain neutral, essentially isolating itself from European affairs.

The term "isolationism" first became widely used prior to World War II (1939–45), when many citizens and politicians in the U.S. felt that the country should refrain from becoming embroiled in conflicts that were spreading throughout Europe at the time. Indeed, it had become a tradition since the days of Washington for the country to pursue a policy of nonintervention with foreign powers. Remaining neutral, or uninvolved, in global affairs was considered standard U.S. policy until the early 20th century.

Since then, the world has become increasingly globalized, with the U.S. playing a leadership role in international politics. The U.S. asserted itself as a superpower especially strongly during the administration of President George W. Bush (R, 2001–09), who launched two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, that many viewed as attempts to expand U.S. military dominance throughout the world.

More recently, however, a growing number of Republicans—most of whom had embraced Bush's expansive foreign policy—have come to criticize the continued military involvement of the U.S. in other countries' affairs, a stance more commonly associated with liberals. At the first presidential debate among candidates for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, most candidates opposed the continued presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Additionally, Republicans have joined with some on the left to criticize U.S. involvement in an international campaign in Libya begun in March 2011. [See Republican Presidential Candidates Debate U.S. Foreign Policy (sidebar)]

Although many Republicans, such as libertarian Representative Ron Paul (R, Texas), have criticized ongoing U.S. military campaigns, others on the right, most notably Senator John McCain (R, Arizona) and former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty (R) have expressed frustration and disappointment with their fellow Republicans, describing them as isolationists.

Some observers, meanwhile, note that the word "isolationist" has been used essentially to denote political figures who oppose military conflicts, rather than those urging the total isolation of the U.S. from global affairs. Indeed, they say, many individuals labeled "isolationist," tend to embrace free trade and diplomacy between nations. Washington Examiner commentator Timothy Carney explains, "Isolationism’ has long been a vague term, used mostly as a slur against people opposing foreign military adventures.” He describes the word as "meaningless.” Some commentators prefer to use the term "noninterventionist" to refer to those who oppose U.S. military entanglements.

Can the U.S. truly maintain a policy of nonintervention in foreign affairs? Are political leaders who tend to oppose military action isolationists?

Critics of isolationism say that it is impossible for the U.S. to remain isolated or uninvolved with the affairs of other nations. In addition to protecting its own interests, they say, the U.S. has a moral responsibility to foster freedom and democracy wherever it can. Previous attempts to avoid relationships with other countries, critics assert, resulted in disaster and played a role in worsening such catastrophes as World War II.

Supporters of isolationism say that the U.S. cannot constantly involve itself militarily in the affairs of other countries. "Isolationism," they say, is a derogatory term critics use to describe anyone who is antiwar. U.S. citizens are too removed from the horrors of real war; otherwise, they too would embrace an isolationist foreign policy, supporters say.

Isolationism in U.S. History

One of the major issues during the Washington administration was the extent to which the new nation should involve itself in European affairs. Much of Europe had erupted into war in the late 18th century, with France engaging in conflicts with many other powers, most specifically Great Britain. For the most part, the U.S. remained uninvolved in those wars, although there was pressure from some policy makers for the country to intervene on the side of France, which had recently overthrown its monarchy and which had also aided the U.S. in its own revolution.

In his 1796 farewell address as president, published as a letter to the American people in the American Daily Advertiser newspaper, Washington argued that the U.S. should remain as detached as possible from the affairs of other nations. Forming alliances with foreign powers, he said, was akin to becoming a “slave” to other nations, because such alliances would draw the U.S. into any conflicts or wars in which those nations became involved.

Washington declared in the letter:

_The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign relations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.... Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns...._

_Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may...take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel._

Washington's two immediate successors, John Adams (Federalist, 1797–1801) and Thomas Jefferson (Democratic-Republican, 1801–09), considered involving the nation in the European wars, to some extent. The French Revolution, begun in 1789, resulted in a long period of turmoil that led to Napoleon Bonaparte naming himself emperor of France. Under Bonaparte's rule, France initiated a series of conflicts, later known as the Napoleonic Wars, that involved most European powers, including Britain, Spain, Austria and Russia, intermittently between 1803 and 1815. The U.S. stayed neutral, for the most part, during those conflicts despite a great deal of debate between presidential administrations and Congress.
In December 1823, before a joint session of Congress, President James Monroe (Democratic-Republican, 1817–25) delivered an address that articulated what would become known as the Monroe Doctrine. In that speech, Monroe declared the U.S. intention not to enter conflicts with European powers and to consider incursions by those powers into either North or South America as an act of war. He said in the speech, "In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so. It is only when our rights are invaded or seriously menaced that we resent injuries or make preparation for our defense." He continued, "It is still the true policy of the United States to leave [foreign powers of Europe] to themselves, in hope that other powers will pursue the same course." The Monroe Doctrine had a long-lasting influence on U.S. foreign policy throughout the 19th century. [See Issues and Controversies in American History: Monroe Doctrine]

While the Monroe Doctrine inspired a reluctance to interfere in European affairs, it was also used to justify U.S. military operations in South American and Caribbean nations. During the Spanish-American War (1898), for example, the U.S. aided a revolution in Cuba against Spanish rule. Critics of such actions denigrated the U.S. for attempting to build its own empire in the Western Hemisphere.

U.S. attempts to stay isolated from European affairs were frustrated after World War I (1914–18) erupted in Europe and most of the Continent's nations went to war. The conflict was caused in part by rising nationalism in Europe, which prompted many countries to build up their militaries and then form alliances with each other to defend against possible attacks by other European powers. A crisis began when the Austro-Hungarian Empire annexed Bosnia, a nation of ethnic Serbs, prompting the Serbian nationalist group the Black Hand to assassinate the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. When the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia, Germany rose to Austria-Hungary's defense, Russia defended Serbia, and several other nations took sides as the conflict spread.

At first, the U.S. tried to maintain its traditional policy of nonintervention. In fact, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (D, 1913–21) attempted to mediate between the Allied Powers, represented by Great Britain, France, Russia and other nations, and the Central Powers, consisting of Austria-Hungary, Germany and their allies. [See Issues & Controversies in American History: World War I]

In 1916, Wilson campaigned for reelection using the slogan "He kept us out of war." In his acceptance of the Democratic nomination for president that year, he said:

We have been neutral not only because it was the fixed and traditional policy of the United States to stand aloof from the politics of Europe and because we had had no part either of action or of policy in the influences which brought on the present war, but also because it was manifestly our duty to prevent, if it were possible, the indefinite extension of the fires of hate and desolation kindled by that terrible conflict and seek to serve mankind by reserving our strength and our resources for the anxious and difficult days of restoration and healing which must follow, when peace will have to build its house anew.

German aggression, however, eventually brought the U.S. into the war on the side of the Allies. Indeed, Germany had sunk several ocean liners—most notably the Lusitania, in 1915—that carried U.S. civilians. Additionally, U.S. intelligence alleged that Germany had been colluding with Mexico to launch a possible invasion against the U.S.

World War I became the bloodiest war in human history up to that point, with millions of people dying at the hands of weaponry that was technologically superior to anything that had been previously used on a large scale. Fighting finally came to an end in 1918, with the surrender of Germany. About 117,000 U.S. service members died in World War I. In the wake of the war, Wilson favored forming a League of Nations—an international body that would practice diplomacy to prevent future wars. The formation of the League was included in the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the war. According to a history of Wilson on the website of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the treaty guaranteed "the political independence and territorial integrity of all member nations against outside aggression," and required that nations "consult together to oppose aggression when it occurs." [See Issues and Controversies in American History: League of Nations]

The League of Nations was unpopular with many in the U.S., however, who wanted to stay out of European affairs. The Treaty of Versailles was fiercely debated in Congress, with opposition led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R, Massachusetts). Opponents of the treaty feared that the League of Nations would entangle the U.S. in future European wars. Congress did not ratify the treaty, and the U.S. never joined the League of Nations, thus playing a role in its eventual failure. The League of Nations officially dissolved in 1946.

Isolation once again became the dominant U.S. foreign policy following World War I, and the term itself came into widespread use for the first time. During the 1930s, tensions in Europe began to rise again, with the U.S. maintaining its policy of nonintervention. Under Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, Germany annexed the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia along the German border that was heavily populated by Germans. Some political leaders, most notably British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, believed that appeasing Germany could help Europe avoid another war, and chose not to check Germany's territorial aggression. Some historians later blamed the appeasement policy for allowing Hitler to consolidate his power and expand Germany's military presence, which later made it harder for Allied powers to defeat Germany, ultimately prolonging the war and increasing the number of casualties. That reliance on appeasement, some historians have written, was a direct result of the growing influence of U.S. isolationism after World War I. World War II (1939–45) formally began after Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France united to attempt to halt the German military march through Europe, with the Soviet Union joining them after being invaded by Germany in 1941.

Public opinion in the U.S. at the time was split between isolationists and interventionists, with the former feeling the war was none of the U.S.'s business and the latter insisting the U.S. had to become involved to help protect freedom and democracy throughout the world. The U.S. only entered the war in 1941 after German ally Japan bombed the U.S. military base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

The war ended in 1945; the Allies, led by the U.S., defeated Germany and Japan. By the time the conflict was over, upwards of 80 million people had died.
as a result of both combat and war crimes against civilians, including the Holocaust—the systematic murder by the Nazis of 6 million Jews, as well as millions of other people from various ethnic and religious groups that the Nazis deemed undesirable. Among the dead were more than 400,000 Americans.

The U.S. took an unprecedented leadership role in the aftermath of the war, becoming a superpower whose dominance was contested only by the Soviet Union. Despite not joining the League of Nations, the U.S. was a founding member of the League's successor, the United Nations, in 1945.

Although the U.S.'s role as a diplomatic mediator and international economic powerhouse became generally accepted, its military role abroad was more controversial. Indeed, antiwar protests gripped the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (1959–75) and played a role in the U.S. ending that involvement.

The rest of the 20th century saw an increase in global economic cooperation with the expansion of free trade—international economic policies that reduced protectionist barriers, such as tariffs, on trade between countries. Although free trade became accepted as routine among U.S. policy makers, it was attacked by some who argued that allowing companies to do business abroad was costing U.S. workers their jobs. Still, experts say the prevalence of economic ties between nations over the past several decades has essentially made it impossible for a nation as large and powerful as the U.S. to remain isolated economically, if not militarily, from the rest of the world in the 21st century. [See Protectionism]

Isolationism Fades After September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks

On September 11, 2001, terrorists crashed two planes into New York City's Twin Towers and a third into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. (The terrorists intended to crash a fourth plane into the Capitol, though resistance from passengers on the plane caused it to crash instead into an empty field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.) The attacks resulted in a more aggressive U.S. foreign policy. President George W. Bush secured congressional authorization to lead a coalition that attacked Afghanistan, in October 2001, and invaded Iraq, in March 2003. Though Afghanistan's Taliban government had said it was harboring Osama bin Laden—the head of the Al Qaeda terrorist network and alleged mastermind of the September 11 attacks—the invasion of Iraq
had little direct connection to the events of September 11. Indeed, while the Bush administration made some attempts to tie Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda, Bush mainly claimed that Hussein was a danger to U.S. interests and had to be contained before he could become a serious threat.

That latter premise was the basis for what became known as the Bush Doctrine—the policy that the U.S. reserved the right to attack preemptively countries that it perceived as a threat. Bush criticized as isolationist many who opposed his policies. The Bush Doctrine was said to represent the neoconservative line of thought to which many in his administration subscribed—that the U.S. should play a dominant role in world affairs and exercise its strength as the world’s largest superpower.

Some historians have tied the Bush Doctrine to the Monroe Doctrine, even though the earlier approach was associated with isolationist foreign policy. Indeed, they said, far from being an isolationist idea, the Monroe Doctrine implied the U.S.’s right to assert its strength throughout the Western Hemisphere. The Bush Doctrine, they contend, extended that same idea to the entire world. Commentator Paul Knox writes for the Toronto Globe and Mail, "One way to read [Bush's national security strategy] is as a Monroe Doctrine for the entire planet. It proposes explicitly to maintain overwhelming military supremacy around the globe."

Indeed, during the tenure of the Bush administration, neoconservative ideology dominated the political right and influenced a great deal of U.S. foreign policy. Foreign Policy journalist James Traub comments on the ideology laid out by two neoconservative leaders, William Kristol and Robert Kagan:

> They argued that the end of the Cold War [an ideological struggle between the U.S. and the communist Soviet Union] era had left America with unrivaled power; rather than retreating from a destiny thrust upon it by history, America should accept its new role as the "benevolent global hegemon." They concluded that the United States should marshal its military, diplomatic, economic, and, yes, moral force in order not only to preserve the global order but to make it more like our own: more democratic, more committed to free markets.

Neoconservatives also frequently spoke of the notion of American exceptionalism—that the U.S. was an inherently special country that had a unique role to play in global affairs. [See The Bush Presidency; American Exceptionalism]

The wars launched by Bush were popular with many in the U.S. at first, but support for each effort waned steadily as the wars dragged on far longer than the Bush administration had predicted. Although the regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq were ousted relatively easily by U.S.—led coalition forces, the military has been forced to endure long operations in each country to ensure their stability. Additionally, the U.S. has conducted several lesser-known military interventions, such as its unmanned drone attacks against alleged Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen over the past several years, and its 2011 covert operation to kill bin Laden in Pakistan.

In March 2011, the U.S. military led a U.N.—authorized action to prevent Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi from attacking Libyan citizens as part of a crackdown on rebels. Although President Obama (D) initially promised that the U.S. military involvement in Libya would last only a matter of days, Qaddafi withstood attacks from rebel forces as the revolution gradually turned into a civil war for control of the country. As the U.S. involvement in Libya continued, many critics began to characterize it as a war and argued that the president did not have the authority to launch a war without congressional approval, which Obama had not sought. Supporters of U.S. involvement in Libya, however, noted that the U.S. was only one of several countries participating in the operation. In fact, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was now spearheading the mission, and while the U.S. participated in air strikes, no U.S. service members fought on the ground. [See U.S. Intervention in Libya Prompts War Powers Debate (sidebar)]

As a result of the Republicans’ decidedly antiwar stance in the first 2012 presidential debate in June 2011, many observers asserted that Republicans were once again embracing an isolationist foreign policy. Traub notes:

> Neoconservative foreign policy is dead.... None of the seven [presidential] candidates talked about the moral purposes of American power. Quite the contrary. Those who addressed the current bombing campaign in Libya opposed it as a distraction from "national interests."

> Those who talked about the war in Afghanistan spoke of getting out rather than winning.

Observers speculate that the current weakened state of the U.S. economy could be one reason why many congressional leaders have turned from an aggressive foreign policy. Indeed, those observers say, the U.S. budget deficit is extremely high, in large part because of the country's recent military expenditures.

Others have been harsher on the Republican reversal on foreign policy. Rolling Stone journalist Matt Taibbi writes:

> Six or seven or eight years ago, I seem to remember, anyone who even hinted that not using military force to resolve any foreign policy dispute, no matter how trivial or imaginary the justification, was to be considered a traitor.

> Now, all of a sudden, Republicans are on the outside looking in, and entering a presidential election season, they've suddenly decided to play the pacifist card.

Many Republicans themselves rejected the term "isolationist," insisting that they fully embrace relations with other countries as long as they do not include military action—a position traditionally held by liberals.
U.S. Must Engage the World, Critics Say

Opponents of isolationism insist that if the U.S. were to detach itself from the affairs of other nations, peace and democracy would suffer. Alvin Felzenberg and Alexander Gray of the conservative magazine *National Review* argue, for example, that a measure proposed by Representatives Barney Frank (D, Massachusetts) and Ron Paul (R, Texas) to cut defense spending would "curtail American military strength around the world." Felzenberg and Gray call it "as foolhardy as it is unrealistic" and assert "Were such a policy enacted, the nation and the world would be set on a path not toward peace, but toward instability, conflict, and a lessening of freedom in many parts of the world."

Critics also argue that, with many pro-democracy movements arising overseas, the U.S. must not turn inward. Indeed, they say, the country has a moral duty to foster those movements. Pawlenty argues, "[P]arts of the Republican Party now seem to be trying to out-bid the Democrats in appealing to isolationist sentiments.... This is no time for uncertain leadership in either party. The stakes are simply too high, and the opportunity is simply too great."

Opponents say that isolationism can cost innocent lives. Senator McCain, who asserts that the isolationist wing of the Republican Party has "moved more center stage," argues that Qaddafi "was going to go house to house to kill everybody [in Benghazi] a city of 700,000 people. What would [we] be saying now if we had allowed for that to happen?"

Similarly, critics note that previous U.S. attempts to isolate itself from crises overseas resulted in disaster. Felzenberg and Gray reflect on the post–World War I European political climate that saw the rise of Hitler's Nazi Party in Germany, and they argue, "The United States and the world paid a severe price for the ostrich-like behavior too many democratic nations exhibited during the 1920s and 1930s."

Opponents also reject the idea that the U.S. should focus less on overseas matters because of its ailing economy. Felzenberg and Gray insist, "[T]he security concerns of the United States do not disappear in times of economic distress. America's interests, whether economic, strategic, diplomatic, or moral, cannot be set aside when Congress tires of them."

Rather than isolating itself, supporters say, the U.S. should support democracy wherever it can by actively helping pro-democracy movements abroad. Pawlenty argues that, despite what some of his Republican colleagues have said, the U.S. is actually not doing enough to help the revolution in Libya. He maintains, "In Libya, the best help America can provide to these new friends is to stop leading from behind and commit America's strength to removing
Critics claim that history has shown how important the strength and security of other democracies are to U.S. interests. For Slate journalist Christopher Hitchens, that point is exemplified by the Marshall Plan, an ambitious policy crafted by U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall and instituted after World War II to help rebuild Europe. Hitchens argues that isolationists behave "as if we had no stake...in the welfare of other peoples and societies. The whole American experience since Marshall aid testifies to the contrary."

**Nonintervention Serves U.S. Interest, Supporters Say**

Those who argue that the U.S. should not interfere in the affairs of other nations contend that the Bush Doctrine essentially failed, leaving the U.S. overextended around the globe. Traub argues that neconservative foreign policy "was given a good shot, and didn't exactly work out as planned. America wasn’t greeted as a benevolent hegemon in Iraq or pretty much anywhere else, and regime change proved to be an extremely crude instrument for the shaping of a better world order."

Republican supporters of isolationism frequently express an increasing distrust of government in general that makes them oppose U.S. involvement abroad. Traub articulates those views, writing, "If government is a threat to our freedom and economy at home, how can we view it as a benevolent force abroad?"

Supporters of nonintervention also say that the U.S. made a mistake in continuing to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan. Former Massachusetts governor and candidate for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination Mitt Romney argues, "We've learned that our troops shouldn't go off and try to fight a war of independence for another nation."

Many supporters of limited U.S. military involvement in foreign countries hold their position simply because war is so terrible. If people in the U.S. truly appreciated the costs of war, they say, they would demand a less interventionist foreign policy. Indeed, many supporters maintain, with no military draft, fewer and fewer U.S. residents have had to share the burden of going to war, and it is far easier to support wars when they require no personal sacrifice. Retired Air Force Colonel William Astore argues that a "national obliviousness" toward the horrors of war has infected the U.S. population. He contends that the government has "not sought to mobilize a new 'greatest generation' to share the burden of fighting wars "but rather to keep a clueless one—clueless, that is, as to war's fatal costs and bitter realities." If more U.S. citizens understood the evils of war, many supporters of nonintervention say, they would be more likely to oppose the country's numerous military excursions.

Advocates of less involvement in other countries' affairs point out that, in its isolationist past, the U.S. was generally at peace. By contrast, Astore says, since the U.S. abandoned isolationist policies, it has been in "a state of eternal war." It will take a strong popular movement, Astore argues, to hold in check the "Washington elites" who keep involving the nation in one conflict after another.

Most supporters argue that "isolationism" is an archaic term that is used as a slur to deride those who are antiwar. Representative Paul, who prefers to see himself as a "noninterventionist," insists, "I believe our founding fathers had it right when they argued for peace and commerce between nations, and against entangling political and military alliances."

Indeed, critics say a noninterventionist policy is at the heart of U.S. principles. Paul argues, "It's hypocritical and childish to dismiss certain founding principles simply because a convenient rationale is needed to justify interventionist policies today. The principles enshrined in the Constitution do not change."

**Debate Over Intervention Not Likely to End Soon**

The issue of how the U.S. should approach its relationships with other countries is as old as the nation itself, and is unlikely to disappear in the near future. U.S. foreign policy will, however, likely continue to evolve with time, changing to shape and respond to world events.

Many commentators and even some Republican politicians have asserted that conservatives have recently opposed U.S. engagements around the world, particularly the conflict in Libya, simply because there is a Democrat in the White House. It remains to be seen how long the conflict in Libya will last, and whether conservatives in Congress will continue to oppose it.

The U.S. currently conducts military operations in several countries, though Obama has stated he will soon begin to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. The question is whether that drawdown will mark the beginning of a smaller global military presence for the U.S.

**Discussion Questions**

1) How do you think George Washington's views on relationships with other countries shaped later U.S. foreign policy?

2) Did isolationism in early U.S. history refer solely to military intervention? How have international relations changed since then? How have those changes affected U.S. foreign policy?

3) How are the Monroe Doctrine and the Bush Doctrine similar? How are they different?
4) Does the U.S. military action in Libya conflict with the foreign policy initiatives of early presidents? Why or why not?

5) Imagine you were running for president. Draft a speech in which you lay out your foreign policy.

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Bibliography


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Additional Sources

Additional information about isolationism can be found in the following sources:


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Contact Information

Information on how to contact organizations that either are mentioned in the discussion of isolationism or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

**Brookings Institution**
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
Telephone: (202) 797-6000
Internet: www.brookings.edu

**Council on Foreign Relations**
1777 F Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006
Telephone: (202) 509-8400
Internet: www.cfr.org

**U.S. Department of State**
2201 C Street, N.W.
Keywords and Points

For further information about the ongoing debate over isolationism, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

- American exceptionalism
- Bush Doctrine
- Foreign affairs
- Monroe Doctrine
- Nonintervention

Citation Information