

**THREE VIEWS OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY:  
NATIONALIST, REALIST, AND RADICAL**  
(based on the book of the same name by Jerald Combs)

There are many ways to view American foreign policy. The following three summaries represent the most common among scholars.

**Nationalist:** This view says that American foreign policy represents a combination of self interest and of idealism. Historically, the US government has taken both into account when making crucial decisions. Like any government, the US must consider the self interest of its society, which is taken to include physical security as well as economic interests, but the US government also responds to humanitarian concerns and tries to advance democracy in the world. Scholars writing from this viewpoint include Herbert Feis. Many journalists also write from this point of view, sometimes without knowing it.

A nationalist conception is compatible with a pluralist view of American politics; this view says that power is shared among many competing interest groups and that temporary coalitions determine policy. No one group dominates or holds power for long.

**Realist:** This view says that American foreign policy is based on self interest conceived mainly in terms of physical security, but sometimes broadened to include economic interests when those interests are so important that they affect physical security. Realists, long the dominant school among international relations scholars, believe that all national governments relate to each other in terms of power and that power is based on military force, which is in turn related to economic strength. Obviously, skillful leadership also plays a role here. Realists dismiss the idea that any government, including the government of the United States, seriously considers ideals when making decisions. Governments may say such things, but they are only propaganda to disguise the fact that they are acting, as they must, in terms of self interest. The father of the realist school in the US was the German emigre scholar, Hans Morgenthau, who taught for many years at the University of Chicago and then at Columbia. John Mearshimer of the University of Chicago is a prominent realist scholar today. In terms of process, a realist view normally conceives of foreign policy as being made by groups within the executive branch of the US government, without much influence from the public, except in times of drawn out crisis such as the War in Vietnam.

**Radicals** believe that American foreign policy is based on the economic interests of the largest American corporations. Thus, they see the United States as an imperialist power that seeks to exploit the labor and raw materials of poor countries. Radicals believe that the American government uses its military and diplomatic power to protect the profits and power of the large corporations, applying military force as necessary to achieve these purposes. Noam Chomsky is the most powerful contemporary spokesperson for this point of view. Historically, the "revisionist school" of American foreign policy, associated with William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Gar Alperovitz, and Lloyd Gardner developed a radical interpretation against the prevailing nationalist and realist views. Radicalism is associated with an elite theory interpretation of American politics, which holds that the relatively small group of people who control the major corporations also dominate American politics.