

Conclusion

1

The life and career of Sumner Welles paralleled a period of increasing American involvement in the world, as U.S. foreign policy evolved from a preoccupation with mostly regional concerns to the envisioning of an American-guided world order. Welles was a transitional figure in American foreign policy, born when the United States, confronted by the challenges of the closing frontier and a rapidly industrializing economy, began to seek overseas outlets for commercial expansion. His initiation into the diplomatic corps coincided with President Wilson's effort to reorder world politics. He found inspiration in the Wilsonian vision of the United States as the political, economic, and moral engine of a new international order, one that would abjure both imperialism and revolution and lead the world forward under the banner of liberal, capitalistic internationalism.

In the early 1920s, Welles worked to reorder U.S. relations with Latin America, seeking to consolidate and integrate the hemisphere politically and economically behind U.S. leadership. He continued these efforts in the 1930s with the Good Neighbor Policy. He was also behind two of the most important events in American diplomacy before U.S. entry into the war: the Welles plan of 1937 sought to reorient U.S. foreign policy by calling for a conference of neutrals which would agree to an assortment of Wilsonian principles; and his 1940 mission to Europe attempted, like Wilson before him, to achieve a peace without victory while laying a claim for significant U.S. involvement in any postwar settlement.

From the earliest months of the war Welles embarked upon a path of postwar planning that would help ensure U.S. hegemony in the postwar world. He thus played a leading role in formulating U.S. war aims. He helped draft the Atlantic Charter, later seeking to expand its meaning to cover the entire globe. The Atlantic Charter heightened expectations that the United States had pledged a better postwar future to the peoples of the world. He aimed to globalize the charter by giving notice that those liberated by the war would achieve self-determination. But, as the political and military realities of the war intruded, Welles often assented to arrangements that seemed to contradict his professed aims. He believed grand pronouncements such as the Atlantic Charter were often necessary to express broader goals important to gain public support in wartime. Yet, while he would later argue that the charter was merely a statement of broadly articulated war aims and not a guarantee of specific action, the expectations raised by the charter were never fully met at the conclusion of the war. As the war progressed and he was confronted with the hard realities of Alliance relations, he would find that he could not always pursue the ideals of the Atlantic Charter, which had in many ways become a liability.

Central to Welles's vision of a new order was U.S. participation in a world organization. Here he achieved his greatest success, spearheading the effort

to create a new League of Nations. The inclusion of numerous members of Congress in crafting a charter for a new world organization helped secure bipartisan support for the draft plan. Furthermore, many of the members of Welles's committees would play significant roles in postwar planning during the years 1943-1945, thereby ensuring that his influence would continue to be felt at future wartime conferences. Nevertheless, his failures in this area were equally significant. His efforts to create a number of smaller, regional organizations met with little success. In addition, he failed to anticipate the ways in which heightened nationalism would create a stumbling block to the creation of regional federations, as nations were becoming less inclined to cede sovereignty to any international body, large or small. National consciousness had been heightened almost everywhere, and attempts at repressing national aspirations during the war ironically made nationalism more desirable, not less. As for his efforts to endow the future world organization with an effective means of collective security, he wanted to avoid the peril of the United States becoming the world's policeman and thus sought to create a fully integrated international police force able to intervene at the request of the new world organization. This, too, met with little success.

5

Throughout the Second World War, Welles sought nothing less than a complete restructuring of international relations. In numerous speeches he expressed his view of the war's potential to bring about a new world order, and he pursued this vision through the postwar planning committees. He anticipated a huge expansion of American interests and commitments around the world. This expansion brought about a significant alteration of the American perspective of the world, where events in previously strategically insignificant areas were now believed to have consequences for the United States because of the impact they might have on other areas that suddenly seemed vital. This led to a reflexive impulse to project American interests broadly, no matter the consequences, and fueled the belief that the smallest shifts or changes in the global balance of power could destabilize U.S. security.

Welles also desired to restructure the world economy. He saw the inter-American economic system — with its economic interdependence and integration — as exportable globally. He anticipated that at the end of the war America would be positioned to expand its economic reach all over the world. He understood that, while much of the rest of the world would struggle to rebuild after the war, the United States would control a huge share of the global market. He thus anticipated and proposed an American effort to reconstruct not only the economies of the weakened Allied and neutral nations, but also those of the defeated Axis powers. As he had outlined, such generosity would not be bestowed for mere altruistic reasons, but rather as hardheaded self-interest. A framework of international economic institutions would not only serve American economic interests, but also American national security. After all, the reconstruction of the world would benefit the United States by providing new markets, raw materials, and potential allies, and would also enable Washington to take the lead in creating a new postwar economic order dominated by the United States.

Welles also led the American effort to guide the postwar course of the other great powers. As early as the spring of 1942 he argued that the Axis powers should not be so crippled as to prevent their return to the community of nations after the war. They would instead be reconstructed so as to lend support to U.S. interests in the postwar era. While democracy and liberal capitalism would be the ultimate goal for postwar Germany, Italy, Japan, and France, democracy would perhaps not be suitable everywhere. In China, for example, as in much of Latin America, a simple adherence to U.S. objectives would suffice. He initially endeavored to insure that the peace would be reconciled with America's war aims, but he soon went beyond that initial goal, embarking upon more specific investigations of the postwar status of particular powers. When the planning committees were disbanded in 1943, they had completed the first thorough examination of Washington's postwar aims toward the other powers. Yet it proved difficult to implement a long-range program to achieve Welles's aims, and his assumptions often demonstrated that it was unwise to do such planning in the relative isolation of Washington, independently of the countries concerned. Furthermore, the people conducting such discussions did not always understand the unique features of the diverse societies and cultures in question.

Welles's wartime vision also included the weakening and eventual destruction of imperial systems abroad and the ultimate granting of independence and self-rule to the European colonies. During the war, American interests underwent a vast expansion. Numerous colonial areas that had been previously ignored were suddenly seen as vital to the nation's postwar strategic and economic concerns. He opposed European-style colonialism not only because he thought the trend toward independence irreversible, but also because he thought that America should lead the forces of change in the colonial world rather than confronting revolution and upheaval. He thus worked to ally the United States with the emerging nationalisms of the colonial world. Seeking a safe middle ground between the colonialism of the past and the possibility of future revolution, independence would be suitable in some areas, international trusteeships in others.

During the war he promoted the destruction of the colonial status quo without regard for the consequences. After all, with the notable exception of the Western Hemisphere (where the United States already was the dominant power and therefore had a vested interest in promoting the status quo), America stood to gain from an alteration of the old global order. He foresaw that the United States would have expanded interests, not only in the future markets of Europe, but also in the raw materials, trade, market potential, and strategic importance of the Far East, Africa, the Pacific, and the Near East.

10

Welles sought to stretch the meaning of the Atlantic Charter to ensure that the colonial masters would not seek a return to the status quo at the end of the war. Yet Cold War considerations would begin to take precedence over support for the aspirations of colonial peoples. And, in any event, his ideas for trusteeships never anticipated what would happen in the postwar world,

where the rapid pace of decolonization would overwhelm careful planning for the future. He failed to give adequate consideration to the problems of underdevelopment and political instability that would plague the postcolonial world, and he underestimated the likelihood that powers other than the United States might fill the void created by decolonization. During the war, Welles spoke with great moral fervor about self-determination, independence, and liberation in the colonial world. Yet decolonization often led to destabilization, and the paramount concern for order increasingly shaped policy toward nationalist movements. Henceforth, after the war, conditional support for self-determination and nationalism would increasingly take a back seat to the strategic concerns of the Cold War struggle. No longer would there be talk of promoting change and upheaval throughout the world. As America became a superpower and hegemon, it increasingly became the chief defender of the global status quo.

Early in the war, Welles saw cooperation with the Soviet Union as essential to his designs for the postwar world, and he sought to construct a world body that might use regionalism to subordinate many of Moscow's territorial aims to the larger goal of continued *entente*. Perhaps Moscow would merely erect its own Good Neighbor Policy for its sphere of interest, which might avoid open political and military intervention and instead concentrate on economic influence. At the very least, regionalism might help contain the Soviet Union from fully extending its influence into the heart of Europe. He hoped his regional approach to the postwar organization might allow a certain degree of autonomy for the great powers within their own spheres of interest, but he failed to understand that federations would do absolutely nothing to extend the principles of the Atlantic Charter to Eastern Europe. Furthermore, he discovered that he could not consistently adhere to the ideals of the charter when the realities of Grand Alliance politics demanded concessions to Soviet aims. How to reconcile the principles of the charter with Soviet demands became one of the issues that most concerned Welles before his resignation. He underestimated the Russian compulsion for security in Eastern Europe, and he naively thought that schemes such as federations or national plebiscites might resolve the problems of the region. If these approaches did not work, he reasoned, economic aid might be used to influence Russian behavior. Yet he came to realize by mid-1942 that the question of Eastern Europe presented the United States with an almost impossible dilemma — the political shape of the postwar world would be decisively shaped by the position of the Red Army when the war ended and not by idealistic pronouncements made in Washington.

Welles remained publicly silent about such concerns, and his public rhetoric about a "new order" and the abolition of spheres of influence continued apace. He often used Wilsonian phraseology to protect the administration against domestic criticism. But such rhetoric helped inflate expectations and subsequently fueled later crises. He concealed his more candid fears about America's inability to influence outcomes in Eastern Europe because he placed a premium on maintaining relations with Moscow. He was willing to acquiesce to Soviet control of the region if it meant holding the wartime alliance together after the war. He wanted the peace to be different from

what had come before, but the simple fact that Washington remained impotent to do anything about Soviet aims in Eastern Europe made it less and less likely that the peace would develop along lines other than those dictated by spheres of influence and the balance of power.

In any event, the eventual outcome in Eastern Europe was always less important to Welles than the larger goal of creating and safeguarding an American-led new world order. He anticipated the coming of this "Pax Americana," and helped facilitate America's transformation from a great power during the Second World War to global preeminence during the Cold War. Yet his vision of a coming American Century was not always tempered by an understanding of the limits of American power and, in the decades that followed, Americans would repeatedly learn the difficult lesson that, despite their vast new power, they would inevitably endure great sacrifices in creating the kind of world order they desired. America's quest for hegemony would prove to be messier and more complicated than Welles had ever anticipated.

Welles significantly shaped America's postwar course, and much of his legacy continued to guide American foreign policy long after his departure from public service. He aimed to create a new liberal-internationalist world order led by the United States, which opened the way to a crusading internationalism that, with decidedly mixed results, animated much of American policy through the rest of the century. Granted, Welles was not alone in this effort. He was a contemporary of Wendell Willkie, Walter Lippmann, John Foster Dulles, Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, Harry Hopkins, Henry Wallace, and George F. Kennan. Yet, without Welles, the story of America's rise to globalism is not complete. With the passage of more than a half-century since his resignation, should we not at last place him among those other architects of the "American Century"?



[Sumner Welles, Postwar Planning, and the Quest for a New World Order, 1937-1943](http://www.gutenberg-e.org/osc01/print/osc09.html)