

# The USA's relationship with Europe 1840–1930

The relationship between the United States and the major European countries went through a variety of phases in the period 1840–1930. A large number of different factors influenced this relationship: traditional rivalries and alliances; the US Civil War; commercial developments in the United States; and its new position as a major player in world politics. The fact that the United States contained many ex-Europeans, with their own traditions and rivalries, also influenced policy. The large number of Irish people who settled in the United States, for example, often felt strong dislike for the British. Many Germans remained fiercely loyal to their former homeland. Not all immigrants were able to leave their own histories behind when they arrived at Ellis Island.

1. Traditional Rivalries
2. Civil War
3. Commercial Growth
4. US in World Affairs
5. Europeans in US  
- immigrants

## US relations with Britain and Germany until 1914

Of all the major European powers, Britain and Germany were the two that featured most prominently in the history of US foreign policy in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

### Britain

Although the British started out as the hated colonial rulers of the USA, the two countries later enjoyed a mainly stable relationship. After the War of Independence in 1783 and again after the War of 1812, well-thought-out peace treaties removed most potential causes of friction. The British foreign secretary George Canning had strongly supported the Monroe Doctrine in the 1820s, and good sense on both sides prevented conflict over the border with Canada in the Oregon boundary issue (see page 74). Britain and the USA benefited enormously from trade with each other, with Britain buying vast amounts of the cotton and tobacco that the South produced, and selling enormous quantities of manufactured goods to the rapidly growing population of the United States.

The US Civil War could well have caused major problems for this relationship, bearing in mind that the Southern economy was so dependent on exporting cotton to Britain. The North blockaded the South and stopped most of its cotton exports to Britain. With its massive navy, Britain could easily have broken the blockade, which had led to mass unemployment in the Lancashire cotton industry. However, the British prime minister, Lord Palmerston, insisted that his country should remain neutral in the conflict.

### Ellis Island

The island near New York where the vast majority of immigrants from Europe arrived and were processed.

In addition, Jefferson Davis was a poor diplomat who hated the English. He failed to capitalise on the support the South had in both British politics and the press. When the North had a grievance against the British because some assistance had been given to Southern blockade runners, the issue was intelligently dealt with by the British through **arbitration** and the payment of proper compensation to the United States. The relationship between the USA and Britain survived the American Civil War well.

**arbitration**  
Using an independent referee to settle a dispute, and agreeing to abide by the judgement of that referee.

After the Civil War, there were no major issues between the USA and Britain. There were signs of a growing commercial rivalry in the 1890s, but there was also the feeling in both countries that a 'special relationship' was developing. They co-operated well over the Boxer Rebellion in China when their joint interests were threatened (see page 94).

**Note:**  
The Boxer Rebellion was an anti-foreigner, anti-Christian-missionary peasant uprising in China in 1900, which had some official backing by the Chinese authorities. In one area of Beijing, the Boxers besieged many foreigners, who were rescued by troops from several countries, including the USA.

### Germany

Germany only emerged as a unified country and major power in 1871, so no significant relationship existed with the United States until the later 19th century. Prussia, the state that had led the unification of Germany, had supported the North in the Civil War. By the 1880s, about 9% of the US population originated from what had become unified Germany, and many of these people still felt strong ties to the 'mother country'.

**Note:**  
The United States intensely disliked the German colonisation of Samoa in the 1880s, which was felt to be very much in an American sphere of interest.

However, a stronger degree of rivalry than existed with the British began to emerge by the later 1870s. The aggressive nationalism of the Germans did not appeal to many in the United States. There was strong commercial and economic rivalry between the USA and Germany, particularly in the Far East and in Central and South America. One of the reasons that the United States was so keen to take over Guam and Hawaii in the Pacific was because it feared that the Germans might take the nations first. The relationship between the USA and Germany was becoming increasingly tense when the First World War broke out in Europe in 1914.

### The growth of the US navy

Since the earliest days of the republic, the US navy had been a critical resource for the defence of American trade and commerce. A naval academy for training officers had been created at Annapolis in 1845, and the small US navy had played an important part in the US-Mexican War. During the Civil War, control of the seas was vital for the North.

However, the US navy, like the army, was cut right back in the 1870s. The public was tired of war and the strain it put on the country's resources; there were no real threats and no apparent need for a navy. A few small squadrons were kept in the Far East, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean to protect US commerce, but on the whole the ships were small and often old-fashioned. However, after 1890 several factors led to a rapid growth in the size and importance of the US navy:

- ✓ • Three presidents in a row – Harrison, McKinley and Roosevelt – were all enthusiastic about naval expansion.
- ✓ • European powers were starting out on a race to build more and better warships.
- ✓ • The Japanese, with a growing navy, were seen as a threat.
- ✓ • A book written by Captain A. T. Mahan, called *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, argued that naval power was vital for a nation's greatness and prosperity, and this had enormous influence in the United States.
- ✓ • The navy played a vital role in so many of the conflicts and acquisitions of the 'imperial' phase of US history after 1890, such as the acquisition of Cuba, that the American people could see that a navy was vital for US trade and prestige. Public opinion demanded a strong navy to protect US interests.

Naval expansion started under Theodore Roosevelt (a former minister for the US navy) and soon 16 new battleships were ready for action. Between 1907 and 1909, Roosevelt sent the ships on an international tour to make sure the world knew that the United States was now a major naval power.

*GREAT WHITE FLEET*

## The First World War

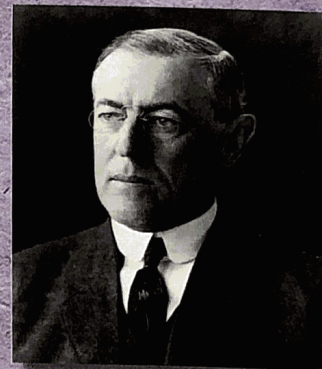
When war came to Europe in August 1914, the US president was the Democrat **Woodrow Wilson**. Able and knowledgeable, he was well aware that the USA was now a world power. Wilson was a highly principled man, deeply religious, and a believer in the importance of democracy and self-determination. He believed that the United States had a special role to play in world affairs. Outwardly he maintained that he disliked Dollar Diplomacy (see page 80) and imperialism, but his own track record in Central America and the Caribbean suggests otherwise.

However much he sympathised with the Allies (Britain, Russia and France) in the war, Wilson initially remained firmly neutral in policy. He had avoided any formal links with either of the two armed camps that had developed in Europe, and did all he could to mediate between the warring nations. When Britain blockaded Germany, it caused an immediate drop in the large trade between the USA and Germany, but the British took care to avoid upsetting the Americans. The USA benefited from the war, taking over both German and British markets in South America and making a great deal of money out of the war itself by setting up loans to countries involved in the conflict.

### Key figure

#### Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924)

Wilson was a Democrat and a leader of the Progressive Movement. Before being elected US president in 1912, he served as president of Princeton University and governor of New Jersey. Wilson narrowly won a second term as US president in 1916. He introduced several major progressive reforms, as well as the famous Fourteen Points, during his time in office.



#### self-determination

The independence of the people of a given area, and their freedom to decide upon their own government.