As the United States representative to the United Nations from 1981 to 1985, Jeane Kirkpatrick was one of the most influential conservative voices in U.S. foreign policy. In this excerpt from a speech delivered in 1986, Kirkpatrick argues for a reevaluation of the nation’s foreign policy.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY:** Comparing and Contrasting

How is Kirkpatrick’s understanding of U.S. national interests similar to or different from the understanding of American national interests that shaped American foreign policy between 1945 and 1985?

...We were born an eighteenth century, liberal nation but we emerged from the nineteenth century with the economic institutions of a developed free market system and the utilitarian assumptions that accompany it. Slowly, the sense of national interest seems to have been dissolved by these assumptions into individual interests. It reemerged as “the greatest good of the greatest number.”

For a century, American foreign affairs were guided by the founding generation’s distrust of U.S. involvement in European politics, its memory of the costs of participation in four wars before our war of independence, and a strong, clear sense of the U.S. national interests. The experience of European wars, the distaste for Europe’s seemingly endless rivalries, and the insulation of two oceans produced nearly a century of peace. In the twentieth century this period from 1812 to 1917 came to be disdained in the United States as isolationist. But, in fact, it was a century of peace in which America prospered.

During that century of peace, in which our prosperity increased, the sense of our invulnerability and of our exceptional qualities grew, along with our idealism. The tendency to think of ourselves as having a unique mission in the world grew and along side it a tendency to believe that whatever problem existed in the world was our problem.

Woodrow Wilson embodied all these tendencies and also the conviction that we could resolve international problems as we resolved problems at home and that it was our business to do so. He thought we could resolve international problems as the Founding Fathers had resolved domestic problems—with a
union based on a good constitution. And so he participated very ardently in writing the Constitution of the League of Nations.

Wilson’s conviction of the unique moral mission of the United States was matched by his confidence that international conflict could be eliminated by good international agreements and by a good international organization.

The American conviction that a proper world organization could prevent conflict among nations was not disturbed by what followed. Neither the rise of murderous regimes between the two world wars nor World War II itself really shook the growing American conviction that a good constitution for a good international organization could solve our problems. As a matter of fact, the rise of these murderous regimes and World War II were interpreted not as casting doubt on the ability of an international organization to maintain peace, but as proving what a terrible mistake it had been for the United States not to join the League of Nations.

Franklin Roosevelt and his advisers seemed as confident as Wilson that a well-constructed global organization could and would ensure peace forever. Even that great realist Harry Truman had great confidence that the United Nations could and would maintain peace.

Now, if they had been right and the United Nations had been able to maintain world peace, then the United States could have no greater interest in the world than the support of that organization. From the founding of the UN, U.S. interests were perceived by many as identical with the world’s interest in peace. We really believed that a global democracy would work. We really believed that all the nations in the world shared our commitment to the values of democracy and our commitment to peace. We quite simply projected American values and democratic values onto all the nations of the world, and then we wrote a constitution—the UN Charter—that embodies that projection.

This act of projecting our values onto the whole world made it possible for us to speak of a world community, which, like all communities, was glued together by shared basic values. All people and all governments were assumed to value peace more than they wanted any of the goals incompatible with peace.

We did not really doubt that in case an outlaw arose among nations and failed to value peace adequately, the other member nations of the United Nations would, through their commitment to collective security, join together to bring the outlaw nation to task and restore order in the world. Just as a posse in a frontier town rounds up a law-breaker and members of that posse risk their lives in doing so, other nations, we believed, would have a strong enough commitment to collective security that, if necessary, they would go to war to maintain peace. In other words, we assumed that a harmony of interests, which is a guiding principle for us in our economic and political domestic life, also exists in international affairs.
Now, of course, it just did not work out. There was a very serious falsification of reality present from the very beginning. From the beginning, the United Nations included countries that did not cherish democratic values and that manifestly were not ready to forgo the use of force in their own foreign policy. In the years since, it has been demonstrated that there is no “world community.” There are no values shared by all peoples and all governments. There is no international global machinery for peace keeping and peace making. The United Nations cannot preserve the values not shared and supported by its member states. This conclusion is, in fact, inescapable if one examines the record. It sounds harsh. I’m sorry. So be it.

The U.S. national interest, therefore, cannot be identical with that of all nations, some of whom do not share our most fundamental principles and interests. Nor can it be identical with the United Nations itself. The idea of a natural harmony of interest among governments cannot survive much direct contact with reality. A good many governments want something more than they want peace. The Ayatollah Khomeini wants to depose Saddam Hussein more than he wants peace, and thousands of his followers want a passport to heaven, signed by the Ayatollah Khomeini, more than they want peace. The Vietnamese want Cambodia more than they want peace. Manifestly, the Soviets want the conquest of Afghanistan more than they want peace. Muammar Qaddafi wants Chad, the Sudan, Tunisia, Egypt, and God knows what else more than he wants peace. The hijackers of the Egyptian airliner in Malta, who shot Israelis and Americans at point-blank range and after each murder ran through the aisles singing and dancing, are not easily fit into conceptions of natural harmony. Our conceptions of natural harmony will not accommodate the predilection for violence and a contempt for one another’s right to survive. …

We fall back again to imagining that profound conflicts in national goals are simply misunderstandings and that if only we understood each other better the apparent conflicts would in fact be dissolved. We think that others’ goals only seem incompatible with ours. But our illusions do not contribute to the achievement of our goals.

Efforts to preserve our illusion of universal harmony have twice led our nation into war, the first time in Korea and the second time in Vietnam. I do not mean to say that these wars were not noble wars and that they were not worth fighting. I do mean to say that we were led into them by the belief that aggression must not be permitted to pay. We thought that we, along with a dwindling company of nations, could serve as a kind of world policeman, like a sheriff in a frontier town bringing an outlaw to justice. We spent a great many American lives as well as a great deal of American treasure that way. My point is not that these wars were not worth fighting. My point is that the illusion of world order, and of a central U.S. role in maintaining it, led us into wars that
we almost surely would never have been involved in, if we had been operating from some less expansive conception of what we were doing in the world.

I believe that our national self-conception grew progressively expansive and at the same time we grew progressively careless about our strengths. There developed a kind of negative correlation between our expectations and our ability to accomplish our goals in the world. More and more, we also lived off of illusions about our power and vulnerability. In the years following World War II, we grew accustomed to thinking of ourselves—our country—not only as stronger than anybody but very nearly as stronger than everybody. We really nearly were. And the stronger we were (we felt), the less we needed to be concerned about the economical use of our resources.

Of course, this has all changed. The rising power and productivity of the nations of Western Europe have been magnified by the development of the European Community. The rising technological and economic power of Japan has been accompanied by the impressive performance of other countries in the Pacific Basin. The Soviet Union’s dramatic growth in military power has been accompanied by the growth of the empire that today extends the Soviet reach to every continent in the world except North America.

But we have not taken as much note as we might of the growing strength of other nations and our own comparative weakness. No longer are we stronger than everybody. It is not clear that we are stronger than anybody....

Now, what would be the consequences for foreign policy of a self-conscious assumption that we had limited resources and that we faced a powerful and dangerous potential adversary in a protracted competition and that, because we have limited resources and face protracted competition with powerful adversaries, we had best husband our resources and protect our national interests? What would we do if we made that assumption?

We would reexamine a great many of our commitments, some of our arrangements for defense, and our economic policies. We would ask concerning each commitment, How does this policy contribute to the American national interest?...

I believe giving a proper, central concern to our national interest would lead us to reexamine some other commitments. It would lead us, surely, to examine defense responsibilities in the Pacific region, where Japan enjoys great strength without equivalent responsibility. It would lead us to reexamine some of our trade commitments.

A clearer conception of the U.S. national interest would transform our conception of our relations with the Soviet Union. I believe the United States has no unique rivalry whatsoever and that the United States has no unique interest in countering Soviet expansion.
We and all of our friends and all of our adversaries ought to be clear that in no sense is the United States involved in a contest with the Soviet Union for world dominance. Our disagreements with the Soviet Union are no different from those with any other country that seeks to maintain its own independence and hopes for a world of independent nations.

Our differences with the Soviet Union, then, are no different from the differences of France, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Argentina, Japan, Indonesia, China, Saudi Arabia, or any other country with the Soviet Union.

The notion of superpower rivalry and the talk of East-West struggle that uniquely involves the United States and the Soviet Union confuse us about our responsibilities and confuse many other nations about who we are and what we are doing in the world today.

I think we should make it clear that all nations who seek to maintain their own independence have a primary responsibility for doing so.

Facing the limits of our resources and our interests means giving up the illusion that we can solve all the world’s problems, cure all the world’s ills. It means forswearing the illusion that we are strong enough or wise enough or good enough to do so. It mean treating our own needs with greater respect.

In international life and foreign policy, as in private life, recognition of one’s limits is a prerequisite to effective action, and self-respect is a prerequisite to respect for others and to relations based on mutual respect. By expecting less of ourselves and being clearer about it, we can accomplish a good deal more. And we can be more certain of passing on our great, but limited, resources and our freedom to our posterity.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Students may answer that Kirkpatrick’s understanding of U.S. national interests differs greatly from the assumptions that she says shaped American foreign policy between 1945 and 1985. She describes these assumptions as being based on the idea that “a global democracy would work.” She says that U.S. policymakers had hoped that, with the support of the UN, the United States would help achieve world peace and a world community. Kirkpatrick says this approach failed because many countries did not share those ideals. She urges that U.S. foreign policy be redirected toward pursuing those interests that are most beneficial to the United States.