**American Domestic and Foreign Policies (1953-1991): Assessing Presidents' Actions and Impact**

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Course:

Due Date:

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The period from 1953 to 1991 witnessed significant domestic and foreign policy developments in the United States. This essay will explore the economic and social improvements by the four presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon. Additionally, it will assess whether their policies strengthened or weakened the nation, examine their contributions to the public interest and democracy, analyze the constitutionality of preemptive wars, and consider the role of human rights and morality in U.S. foreign policy.

**1. Economic and Social Improvements:**

I. Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961):

Eisenhower prioritized economic stability and social progress during his presidency. His "New Look" policy reduced defense spending, enabling increased investment in domestic infrastructure and fostering economic growth (Di et al., 2020). Notably, the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 was passed under his administration, creating a national interstate highway system that improved transportation, trade, and economic development.

II. John F. Kennedy (1961-1963):

Kennedy's presidency ushered in social and economic transformations. Economically, he advocated for tax cuts to stimulate the economy, which were eventually enacted under President Johnson. These cuts bolstered consumer spending and business investment, contributing to economic growth. Kennedy also emphasized civil rights, supporting the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed various forms of discrimination based on race, religion, and more, thus promoting equality and justice.

III. Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969):

Johnson's presidency was marked by his ambitious domestic policy agenda, known as the Great Society. Addressing poverty and inequality was a key focus. The Economic Opportunity Act, implemented during his administration, established the Office of Economic Opportunity and introduced anti-poverty measures. Furthermore, the Social Security Act of 1965 led to the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, providing healthcare access to millions. These initiatives aimed to enhance economic and social conditions by promoting equality and combating systemic disparities.

IV. Richard Nixon (1969-1974):

Nixon pursued a strategy called "New Federalism," seeking to decentralize power and grant more authority to states. To stabilize the economy, he implemented wage and price controls in response to inflation. Additionally, Nixon expanded social welfare programs, exemplified by the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) initiative, which provided financial assistance to elderly and disabled individuals. However, his presidency was marred by the Watergate scandal, which overshadowed some of his domestic policy efforts.

**2. Assessing Strengths and Weaknesses:**

Dwight D. Eisenhower: Eisenhower's policies generally aimed to maintain economic stability and promote social progress. His focus on reducing defense spending and investing in domestic infrastructure contributed to economic growth and improved transportation networks. These policies can be seen as strengthening the United States by enhancing its economic competitiveness and connecting regions. However, some argue that Eisenhower's caution in civil rights matters hindered progress on social equality, which could be seen as a weakening aspect.

John F. Kennedy: Kennedy's policies focused on stimulating the economy and advancing civil rights. The tax cuts he advocated for aimed to boost economic growth and consumer spending (Murphy, 2004). Additionally, his commitment to civil rights strengthened the United States by promoting equality and justice. However, Kennedy's presidency was cut short, limiting the long-term impact of his policies.

Lyndon B. Johnson: Johnson's Great Society policies sought to address poverty and inequality through social welfare programs. The initiatives such as the Economic Opportunity Act, Medicare, and Medicaid aimed to improve economic and social conditions, especially for marginalized communities. These policies can be viewed as strengthening the United States by striving for greater social and economic equality. However, their long-term sustainability and effectiveness have been debated.

Richard Nixon: Nixon's policies reflected a mix of efforts to stabilize the economy and expand social welfare programs. While wage and price controls aimed to tackle inflation, the expansion of social programs like Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provided assistance to vulnerable populations. However, the Watergate scandal and controversies surrounding Nixon's presidency overshadowed some of these policy efforts, leading to a weakening perception of the United States.

**3. Public Interest and Democracy:**

Dwight D. Eisenhower: Eisenhower's policies, such as the emphasis on infrastructure development through the Federal Aid Highway Act, served the public interest by improving transportation, enhancing connectivity, and promoting economic growth. These initiatives increased mobility and facilitated trade, benefiting both individuals and businesses. Eisenhower also prioritized national security, which is essential for a functioning democracy, by implementing the "New Look" policy to maintain a strong defense while reducing military spending.

John F. Kennedy: Kennedy's presidency advanced the cause of democracy through his commitment to civil rights. He supported and advocated for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which played a pivotal role in combating racial discrimination and expanding equal rights for all Americans. His strong stance on human rights issues reflected the democratic values of equality and justice.

Lyndon B. Johnson: Johnson's Great Society policies were aimed at addressing social and economic inequalities, with a focus on improving the lives of marginalized communities (Brown-Collier, 1998). The initiatives he championed, such as the Economic Opportunity Act, Medicare, and Medicaid, aimed to serve the public interest by providing opportunities and support to those in need. These policies sought to empower individuals, reduce poverty, and promote equal access to healthcare, thus fostering a more inclusive democracy.

Richard Nixon: While Nixon's presidency faced controversies, certain aspects of his policies served the public interest and furthered democracy. For example, he expanded social welfare programs, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), to provide financial assistance to elderly and disabled individuals. These measures aimed to address societal needs, promote social well-being, and ensure a basic level of support for vulnerable populations.

**4. Constitutionality of Preemptive Wars:**

The constitutionality of preemptive wars in the United States is a complex and debated issue due to the lack of explicit mention in the Constitution. The powers granted to Congress and the President regarding war, as outlined in the Constitution, form the basis of the debate. Congress has the authority to declare war, while the President serves as Commander-in-Chief. Some argue that the President has the inherent authority to engage in preemptive war to protect national security, while others contend that Congress should authorize such actions.

Proponents of preemptive war often invoke the principle of self-defense, asserting that the President has the authority to act preemptively to prevent an imminent threat to national security (Gray, 2002). However, this perspective is subject to interpretation and relies on the idea of defending the nation from potential harm.

Justifications for preemptive war also involve international law, particularly the United Nations Charter. While the Charter recognizes the right of self-defense, it restricts it to cases of armed attack. Some argue that customary international law may justify preemptive action in the face of an immediate threat, even without a direct armed attack.

The Constitution's system of checks and balances comes into play, with Congress having the authority to regulate and oversee military actions. Critics of unilateral preemptive actions by the executive branch contend that they may undermine the checks and balances framework established by the Constitution.

Determining the constitutionality of preemptive war falls to the courts, whose interpretation can evolve over time. Public debate and engagement are crucial in shaping policy decisions related to military force, as the question of preemptive war involves important constitutional and ethical considerations.

**5. Human Rights and Morality in Foreign Policy:**

The question of whether human rights and morality should be the cornerstones of United States foreign policy is a matter of perspective and policy priorities. Advocates argue that promoting human rights reflects universal values and principles, contributing to global stability and individual well-being. They believe that the United States has a moral responsibility to defend human rights and can serve as a role model for positive change (Brysk, 2009). Supporting human rights also aligns with long-term interests, fostering democratic allies and preventing conflicts rooted in injustice. However, critics argue that an exclusive focus on human rights may overlook other considerations such as national security and economic interests. They advocate for a more pragmatic approach that balances multiple factors. Contextual challenges, including cultural differences and political systems, further complicate the implementation of human rights-centered policies. Striking the right balance between promoting human rights and pursuing other foreign policy objectives requires careful deliberation and consideration of specific circumstances. Ultimately, the approach taken will depend on policy choices and the prioritization of different interests and values.

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