Foreign Policy: Crash Course Government and Politics #50

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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Hello. I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics and congratulations you have made it to the final Crash Course Government and Politics video! Whoo!

Today we're going to look at the mystifying paradox of both the least and most important aspect of government: foreign policy.

Foreign policy is the most important because it has the potential to affect the largest number of people, especially if you include environmental policy, which we should. Also, foreign policy includes a lot of elements of economic policy, so that's important.

But it's also the least important, first because it tends to have a minimal impact on how Americans think about their government, unless the U.S. is at war and even then not always so much.

Second, because it is the least democratic government policy. Which might be a good thing.

(Intro)

Foreign policy is the collection of policies that determine America's relations with other nations and foreign entities.

It includes:

- diplomacy
- military and security policy
- international human rights policies
- economic policies such as trade and international energy policy, and
- environmental policy

My environmental policy is [punches eagle]... that.

In some ways, foreign policy is the quintessential public good. Everybody benefits from a policy that makes citizens, and the world, safer, and no individual, except for maybe a Bond-style supervillain could pull it off by themselves.

Like all government policy, foreign policy has goals. Of course, foreign policy is about providing security, but American foreign policy also seeks to create prosperity, and works toward a somewhat idealistic goal of making the world a better place.

Security has many facets, and like most things, it has grown more complex over time. It used to simply mean being able to repel invaders.

(Mongoltage)

No, not like the Mongols, more like the British.

Now however, in addition to physical security, foreign policy encompasses transportation, energy, cyber-security, and food security.

So we can see how foreign policy and economic policy are closely related. And of course, we can't forget terrorism.

I can't resist a little history here, especially since this is the last episode of the series. From the beginning, starting with George Washington, in terms of physical security, the U.S. has been pretty isolationist, although Canadians and Mexicans would probably disagree.

George Washington urged the U.S. to avoid "foreign entanglements" and we basically did, right up until World Wars I and II, when threats to the international order were seen as detrimental to American security, even though there wasn't much danger of the Germans invading the U.S.

After World War II, the advent of long range bombers and then ICBMs meant that there was a threat to Americans in America and security policy developed into one of deterrence, which meant building up enough military strength to discourage potential enemies, pronounced Soviet Union, from attacking us.

Deterrence was expensive, and required a large arsenal of dangerous weapons and a willingness to fight, which the U.S. did in Korea and Vietnam. We still maintain an enormous nuclear arsenal, but nowadays, different security threats mean deterrence is less important.

It's not clear that a gigantic nuclear threat has much effect on terrorists, and since 2001, America has pursued a global war on terror, that, as we saw in Iraq, includes the doctrine of preemptive war to forestall potential threats.

Although military force may be the most visible form of U.S. foreign policy, it might not be the most useful. For one thing, it's generally seen as a last resort, which I'd say is a good thing. It also has significant downsides, including costs, both in terms of lives and money.

It's also politically dangerous because, while Americans are usually on board with short, decisive and victorious military action, the longer a war drags on, the less support it tends to have.

The main economic goals of foreign policy are to expand opportunities for the U.S., promote foreign investment, maintain access to foreign energy supplies, and promote trade policies that will keep prices low at American big box stores.

What this means in practice is that the U.S. maintains an active role in international organizations, like the World Trade Organization, that make and uphold free trade rules.

We grant "most favorable nation" status to trading partners that agree to low tariffs, and most notably we engage in regional trade agreements like NAFTA.

The third goal of foreign policy is to make the world a better place. One way that the U.S. does this is through international human rights initiatives.

The U.S. is a party to many human rights treaties, but we have a somewhat complicated relationship with the UN and international lawmaking bodies, so we don't sign on to all of them.

For example, the U.S. hasn't signed on to the international criminal court, probably because we're afraid that submitting to its jurisdiction would be a loss of our sovereignty. But in reality international law isn't a huge part of American foreign policy.

The U.S. also engages in international peace-keeping missions, and international peace certainly makes the world a better place.

America doesn't usually commit its soldiers to UN peacekeeping missions, preferring to make its own coalitions or work through NATO, which by the way is an example of an international security agreement too. See there's a lot of overlap here.

Another way the U.S. makes the world a better place is through international environmental policy.

Again, (punches eagle) that's my environmental policy.

Keep eagles away from me.

Environmental policy has a domestic component, as when we set fuel standards or rules for power plant emissions or dumping toxic chemicals, but since we're all on one planet with one environment, it's also part of foreign policy. Talk to me when you live on Mars. Then maybe you don't have to worry about this stuff.

On the other hand, the U.S. lags behind other nations in terms of participation in many global environmental initiatives, which is a bit of a problem considering we're one of the world's biggest polluters and producers of greenhouse gasses.

I can't imagine these statements are going to lead to any bad comments. At all.

When it comes to the conflict between environmental protection and economic growth, Americans tend to choose economic growth.

So, overall, in terms of foreign policy goals, security comes first, economics second and making the world a better place definitely third, at least in terms of formal foreign policy.

This brings us to the question of how foreign policy is made, and why foreign policy is the least democratic type of policy the government makes.

Let's go to the final Thought Bubble for Crash Course Government and Politics. Whoo!

At the top of the foreign policy picture is the President, who the constitution suggests is the nation's chief diplomat, having the power to receive foreign ambassadors and negotiate treaties. The president gets all the face to face meetings with foreign leaders and has authority to hammer out agreements; remember that when the Constitution was written most other countries were still ruled by kings, emperors, and sultans, so we needed a single person to do the negotiating. He also has the advantage of being "the decider" on crucial issues, which may be good or bad depending on whether or not you like his decisions.

But the president, like John Green, is only one man, so most of the day-to-day work of foreign policy is relegated to bureaucrats. Like most of the day-to-day work of Crash Course is relegated to bureaucrats like me, and Stan, and Zulaiha, and Raoul, and Brandon, and Thought Cafe, oh this isn't the credits let's move on.

Diplomatic work is handled mainly by the State Department, but they get a lot of help from the defense department and the intelligence gathering agencies like the CIA, NSA, and DHS. After all, you want to have as much information as you can before you sit down at the table to negotiate. Unless you are negotiating the size and shape of the table. Which has happened.

Congress has a role in foreign policy but it's a limited one, and that's probably a good thing.

The Senate has the constitutional power to ratify treaties, but since a 2/3 vote is required, the president will often try to create foreign policy with executive agreements that only require a majority vote in both houses, which is usually easier to secure, especially recently.

One way Congress has a big role to play in foreign policy through its power of the purse. It takes money to pursue a policy, and it takes a purse to hold money. And especially in the area of defense Congress appropriates a lot of it. Money not purses. Contrary to popular belief, though, Congress hasn't budgeted a lot of money for other types of foreign policy, especially aid to foreign nations.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.
[cries] I'm going to miss you.

Congressional committees, like those on foreign relations can provide some expertise, but not as much as bureaucracies, because Congressmen still have to spend a lot of time running for re-election and usually those elections don't hinge on their knowledge of foreign affairs.

They can also try to limit the executive branch's authority through hearings like the one that targeted the State Department's handling of the Benghazi incident, but these don't usually effect business as usual at the bureaucracy, although they may force a few resignations.

Congress at times does try to assert a foreign policy power like it recently did with Iran's nuclear deal.

But it takes a hot-button issue like Iranian nuclear weapons to garner enough public attention for Congress to wade into foreign policy like this, and I think there's a good argument that they should stay out and leave it to experts.

Like me. I'm real good at Iranian nuclear weapons dealing.

For the state department and the president to work directly with other countries, those countries need to be confident that the deals they hammer out won't be undercut by congress.

Fewer actors in this arena helps build predictability, which is something you want, especially when nuclear weapons are on the table… no matter the table's size or shape.

Interest groups can play a role in foreign policy in terms of shaping the agenda, but they don't do much of the work of crafting the policies themselves. As with domestic policy, interest groups are most effective when they are focused on a single issue, especially if that issue is narrow.

Industry interests can lobby, sometimes vigorously, for trade deals, and labor groups often lobby against them. Since foreign policy often involves foreign nations, you tend to find ethnically based interest groups that can often lobby very vocally, as some Irish-Americans did during the 1980s.

Interest groups that coalesce around issues have been growing in importance, especially as communication technologies enable them to get their message to a wider audience and to organize grassroots lobbying efforts.

In general environmental groups are more effective at organizing demonstrations and human rights groups are more effective at lobbying, but especially in the environmental arena it's difficult to see where their efforts have caused major policy shifts.

Because there aren't that many foreign policy bureaucrats it should be easy for lobbyists to influence them, but the President, who is often the last word on foreign policy is kind of difficult to lobby. He's a busy guy.

There is a lot more I could say about foreign policy, but this is a good place to stop, because I've mentioned the structural aspects of foreign policy – the branches of government and how they make it – and some of the political elements that can influence it.

And we'll talk about more of it in a later episode.
No we won't! This is the last episode!

Foreign policy affects all Americans in ways that other policies

don't. And at least as far as security policy goes, keeping Americans safe from external threats is one thing that almost all Americans, from both ends of the spectrum, agree on.

I hope this series on American government and politics provided you with a little bit of understanding about the way the U.S. works and that it encourages everyone to participate in the political process, wherever you live.

Except for you, you stupid eagle!

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Crash Course was made with the help of all these soaring eagles. Thanks for watching.