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# **A summary of William Appleman Williams' *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy***

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Statesmen and other influential American figures at the start of the 20th century believed that the dramatic surge of expansion that sharply marked the 19th century was essential to American prosperity and security going forward. In his book *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, William Appleman Williams tracks the continuity of this idea through the middle of the 20th century, and contrasts this uncompromising pursuit of expansion with the American belief that this economic intervention would also bring peace and wealth to the rest of the world. The tragedy that Williams promotes to the title of the book is the fact that American ideals contradicted themselves: they spoke about freedom and self-determination while simultaneously depending on privileging American access and control.

The baseline expansionist goal of the United States took several different forms during this period, but the core impulse remained remarkably consistent. Williams largely presents this book as a broad history of this ideology, where public figures are read as symbols of broader social trends. Reading history this way, Williams turns mainly to public records, noting the strong way that the use of language remained consistent even among leaders who, when studied from other perspectives, seemed to disagree strongly over policy. Such disagreement took place within the context of a more pervasive consensus. Williams identifies clear expansionist language, and its implications, from McKinley, Teddy

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Roosevelt, Wilson, Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as well as many of their key advisers and other influential individuals and groups, as they emphasized the importance of specific policies such as the Open Door Policy, the Good Neighbor Policy, and the Marshall Plan. What arises, then, is a powerful picture of expansionism itself as the key to a broad continuity within American policy.

American thinkers rejected overt militant colonialism, but expansionist economic policies consistently provided the basis for engaging in conflicts from the war with Spain in 1898 through the Cold War. Although these same thinkers believed that American influence was the key to unlocking the potential of the rest of the world, the reality for those people who found themselves in a new American economic frontier was instead one of hardship. One major outcome of this is that over time the Soviet Union itself came to symbolize the broader trend toward revolution that arose in the wake of the failure of American diplomatic ideals. The United States came to see the Soviet Union as the sole and implacable enemy because US policy makers could not acknowledge any value in the criticism that accompanied the broader revolutionary impulse. Williams writes that “[w]hen an advanced industrial nation plays, or tries to play, a controlling and one-sided role in the development of a weaker economy, then the policy of the more powerful country can with accuracy and candor only be

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described as imperial.”<sup>1</sup>

In *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, Williams mainly measures the outcomes of American policy against its goals, although this justifies those goals and diverts attention away from exploring consequences unrelated to those goals. This book serves as a historical policy sketch, maintaining its focus tightly on the structural problems within American diplomacy itself. Williams argues powerfully that the longstanding basis of American policy has been a power imbalance with other nations, but he misses the significance of how the focus on expansion also has led to intensifying the effects of America's power. While successfully highlighting the tragic deficiencies of American policy, then, Williams clouds the broader risks that surpass tragedy.

## Reference

Williams, William Appleman. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1962.

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<sup>1</sup>William Appleman Williams. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), 47.