As the co-chairs described in their essay, the Council on Foreign Relations was founded just after World War I to bridge a gap between U.S. foreign policy and the country’s interests overseas. In 1921, with much of the world still reeling from the Great War, the United States had emerged as a major power and yet was drifting toward isolationism. This was a result, in part, of a lack of consensus among the White House, Congress, and the American people on how involved the country should be abroad; it also reflected a long-standing popular mindset. The mission of those who created CFR was to arrest this drift and make the case to those in power and to the public at large for ongoing American engagement in the world.

Nearly one hundred years later, the United States faces a different but no less difficult world. In Asia, nationalism is on the rise as the world’s most populous countries and some of its largest economies increasingly compete for regional primacy. The Middle East, where the United States has expended enormous resources and attention over the past decade, remains central to global energy supplies but is mired in conflict and instability. For the first time in decades, Europe faces challenges to its prosperity and peace, with uncertain prospects for economic growth and renewed Russian assertiveness. There are also a host of issues—including climate change, terrorism, infectious and noninfectious diseases, trade, and cyberspace—wherein global arrangements are inadequate for the challenges at hand.

At the same time, the United States faces domestic problems that threaten the underpinnings of its strength. Political dysfunction calls into question the government’s ability to address complex and pressing issues ranging from immigration and infrastructure to taxation and entitlements. On foreign policy, there is no consensus on either U.S. objectives in the world or how they should be pursued. Against this background, in the face of persistent difficulties at home, and following two costly wars, a growing number of Americans believe that the United States should sharply limit its role in shaping international affairs.

A world of complex challenges, a lack of domestic agreement on what to do about them, and a growing desire to distance the United States from the world: history may not be repeating itself exactly, but there are clear parallels. As a result, CFR has both the opportunity and the obligation to again make a meaningful difference.

Indeed, CFR, with its reputation for nonpartisanship, intellectual independence, extraordinary membership, and deep bench of experts, is uniquely positioned to do just that. CFR contributes to a more informed and considered foreign policy debate and, in an increasingly polarized era, serves as a trusted resource for officials and the public alike. The institution also continues to engage communities that have a growing influence on world affairs and educate the public about how realities abroad affect conditions at home.
CFR’s contributions begin with the David Rockefeller Studies Program, which produces scores of publications every year, convenes hundreds of roundtable meetings, and provides expert briefings for congressional and executive branch officials that highlight emerging challenges and suggest ways of solving, or at least managing, them. CFR’s more than seventy full-time and adjunct fellows include scholars and former practitioners alike, with expertise in critical countries and regions and specialties spanning diplomacy, strategy, and economics. As the world has changed, the institution’s focus has widened to include emerging issues such as geoeconomics, energy and climate change, global health, and Internet governance. In recognition of the growing link between international and domestic issues, the think tank also considers critical challenges at home. The Renewing America initiative is predicated on the belief that America’s strength abroad depends on its ability to address domestic issues ranging from immigration and infrastructure modernization to education, tax policy, and entitlements.

Through its role as a membership organization and a publisher, CFR remains a venue for discussion and debate and a platform for generating innovative thinking. The Meetings and Membership Program brings leaders from business, government, the media, academia, and civil society together to address the most important issues facing the country and the world. In the words of Timothy F. Geithner, then U.S. treasury secretary, “You don’t go to speak to the Council; you go to get advice.” Foreign Affairs magazine continues to serve as the preeminent public forum for analysis of international issues. This year alone saw pieces on subjects ranging from drone warfare and synthetic biology to China, shale, and big data.

In addition to being a resource for an experienced, accomplished, and diverse membership, CFR is a trusted, authoritative resource for the broader public. In the midst of an increasingly polarized political discourse, the institution has distinguished itself as truly nonpartisan. Points of view across the political and ideological spectrums are heard. Members of both parties are active as speakers, contributors, fellows, and members. Openness to thoughtful opinion is a hallmark of CFR.

CFR is also committed to engaging the public and promoting the importance of international issues. A number of products are designed specifically to provide background on complex foreign policy issues, and in recent years, CFR has increased its investment in new technologies, resulting in work that is more accessible, more compatible with online use, and more easily shared across new distribution platforms. Meanwhile, dedicated outreach programs make relevant resources available to nontraditional constituencies—including religious leaders and scholars and individuals active at the state, local, and community levels—that have an increasing role in international affairs.

We are likewise focused on reaching students at the college and advanced high school levels, and in addition to designing programming specifically for them and their teachers, CFR provides enhancements to publications that help integrate global issues into classrooms. Our hope is that, through these efforts, we can instill in the next generation a basic understanding of, and an abiding interest in, international affairs and foreign policy.
CFR.org’s new multimedia series—InfoGuides—offers a comprehensive look at complex foreign policy issues through interactive maps, timelines, slideshows, infographics, and videos, as well as teaching notes for educators.
As we approach CFR’s one hundredth anniversary, this is a good moment to take stock. Today’s world in some ways resembles that of a century ago, when this organization was founded—and even where it is different, what CFR has to offer is highly relevant. Once again, this country and its citizens face important decisions, and we here at CFR are committed to ensuring that the organization is in a position to continue to serve as a trusted, authoritative resource for its nearly five thousand members, for the broader society, and for those in positions of particular influence.

Richard N. Haass

President