

The American Empire?

In 1796 George Washington had warned the nation about the dangers of foreign entanglements -- of becoming entrapped in the alliances and intrigues of European affairs. For most of the 19th century, American policy makers followed this advice. Why did the United States pursue this isolationist path?

There were philosophical and moral reasons. The first thing to keep in mind is that the United States started off as a rebellion against the British Empire. Henceforth, the U.S. tended to look upon European empires with a good deal of suspicion. This belief that the U.S. was fundamentally different from Europe -- more democratic and more fair in our dealings with other nations -- fueled a strong sense of anti-imperialism in American culture.

Because of our democratic inclinations and suspicions of concentrated power, Americans have also often been very wary of maintaining a strong military; fearful that such an institution could be corrupted and abused to subvert the rights of the people

Aside from these philosophical reasons, there was also an economic rationale for the American refusal to become deeply involved in the affairs of the world. While the great European powers were seeking to expand by seizing colonies in Asia and Africa, the U.S. was pursuing a different form of expansion: westward across the continent. In its efforts to acquire lands from the Native American and Hispanic peoples of the West, the U.S. was in reality pursuing an alternative form of imperialism.

This also gave the U.S. access to a plentiful supply of raw materials and created an expanding domestic market, muting demands for overseas markets or resources. Consider that in the 19th and early 20th centuries the U.S. enjoyed abundant supplies of energy through our own reserves of coal and oil, in contrast to the modern age where we increasingly must seek these resources abroad.

We've also been fortunate in being protected by great oceans, making it difficult for the major powers of the world to attack us. Until the modern age, that we didn't need a very powerful military, nor did we really need to become involved in affairs outside of the Americas to ensure our safety.

By the late 19th century, however, these conditions had begun to change. In 1890 the frontier was officially declared closed: there would be no more westward expansion. Economic anxieties were heightened by the boom-bust cycle which increasingly characterized the industrial economy -- rapid growth, leading to overproduction, saturation of the marketplace, and collapse. Twice in the late 19th century, in the 1870s and 1890s, the U.S. economy fell into serious depressions. Many policy leaders and businessmen felt that to escape this cycle it was vital that the U.S. pursue a vigorous foreign policy to open up new markets. Albert Beveridge, Senator from Indiana, put it this way:

"American factories are marking more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us: the trade of the world must and shall be ours.

By 1900 the U.S. was exporting 1.5 billion dollars of goods; by 1914 this had risen to 2.5 billion. There was also a rapid growth in American investments abroad, particularly in Latin America.

This emphasis upon the need for foreign markets was a key component of an influential book by an American naval officer: Capt. Alfred Thayer Mahan. He argued that in the 20th century no industrial nation would be prosper without access to overseas markets, and that it was vital to have a strong navy and strategic naval bases to ensure this access. This book became an international bestseller, influencing the thinking of prominent foreign policy makers not just in the U.S., but throughout the world.

The urge to expand beyond our shores was also fueled by the moral fervor to spread Christianity and American values. Religious missionary groups had been active throughout the 1800s, but by the late 19th and early 20th centuries their efforts were bolstered by a surge of secular confidence in America's ability to transform the world. It was in this age that political progressives began their labors to expand the role of government and create a more orderly and just society at home. This enthusiasm -- this belief that Americans could fundamentally change society -- extended to our overseas effort.

All too often, though, there was also an underlying racism -- an assumption that people with darker skins were intrinsically of inferior character and needed to be "civilized" by the "Anglo-Saxon" race.

This combination of motives, pragmatic and ideological, shaped American foreign policy in this era.

In dealing with Europe, the U.S. generally continued to pursue a policy of limited engagement prior to WWI. European markets were relatively open to American commerce and the region was already well "civilized".

In Asia the U.S. employed somewhat different tactics. The Chinese empire was rapidly collapsing and the imperial powers of the world competed to carve out exclusive access to its potentially rich markets. Worried that the U.S. would be shut out, the American Secretary of State, John Hay, persuaded the major powers to accept what became known as the "Open Door" policy. This stipulated that the markets of China would remain open to all trade. At the same time, the acquisition of military bases in the Philippines and Hawaii enhanced our ability to project naval power into the Pacific, giving the U.S. even more leverage to keep these markets open to American commerce.

It was in Latin America that the U.S. pursued the most aggressive policy. In 1823 President James Monroe had put forth what became known as the "Monroe Doctrine": the declaration that the U.S. had a special interest in the entire western hemisphere and that it would not tolerate other major powers interfering in this region. While this doctrine was mostly theoretical throughout most of the 19th century, by the 1890s the U.S. was increasingly insistent upon considering Latin America as being within its particular sphere of interest.

One of the first major manifestations of this growing American willingness to intervene in this region was the Spanish-American war of 1898. What caused the war of 1898? A key factor was public sympathy for the plight of the Cuban people. Wearying of Spanish rule, Cuban rebels struggled to win

their independence, but Spain responded with brutal military repression. American newspapers covered this story closely, ensuring growing public sentiment for aid to the Cuban rebels.

The United States also had an economic stake in the island. By 1894 over one-half of the cane sugar imported to the U.S. came from Cuba, much of this grown on plantations owned by American investors. The rebellion and new tariff policies gravely damaged this trade.

Nonetheless, the American government was extremely reluctant to directly intervene. Under the administrations of both Cleveland and McKinley American policy remained diplomatic pressure rather than military action. This did bear some fruit: by 1898 the Spanish government had agreed to grant Cuba limited autonomy.

Two events, however, derailed this solution. The first was a letter from the Spanish minister to the United States, Enrique Dupoy de Lôme. This private correspondence referred to President McKinley in disparaging terms, referring to him as "weak" and a "low politician". The letter fell into the hands of an American newspaper, which quickly published it, stirring outrage in the United States, despite an apology issued by the Spanish government. The second and more important incident was the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine.

The battleship had been sent to Havana harbor to ensure the safety of American citizens in Cuba. Then, on the night of February 15th, 1898 the harbor's peace was shattered by a massive explosion: the powder magazines on the Maine had detonated, sinking the ship and killing 266 American sailors. American newspapers immediately fixed blame upon the Spanish government and an official navy investigation concluded that the disaster had been caused by deliberate sabotage through an external explosive device. In fact, the disaster was probably caused by an accident rather than an attack, but at the time the public firmly believed that Spain was involved, putting enormous pressure on the government to act.

On April 20th Congress issued a declaration demanding that Spain fully withdraw from Cuba and authorizing the President to use military power to achieve this end. To make American intentions clear, the resolution also contained what became known as the Teller Amendment, which stipulated that the U.S. was not interested in replacing Spain as a colonial power in Cuba -- that once the war was over Cuba would become free and independent.

When Spain refused to accept this ultimatum, the fighting began.

The war itself was very brief. Although the American army was far from prepared for this conflict, the Spanish military was in even worse shape. The first major engagement took place not in the Caribbean, but on the far side of the world in the Pacific. Intent upon preventing enemy ships from sailing to Cuba, the U.S. forces attacked and destroyed the Spanish Pacific Fleet at Manila Bay in the Philippines. The ground war in Cuba lasted less than a month and by mid-July of 1898, fighting had ceased.

In the Treaty of Paris, signed the same year, Spain ceded complete Cuban independence, but the new island nation remained under the close supervision of the United States. As part of the army

appropriations bill for 1901, the U.S. Congress included what became known as the Platt Amendment, which redefined the future American role in Cuba. The Cuban government inserted these terms in its Constitution, giving the U.S. broad power over Cuban foreign policy and authorizing the U.S. to maintain a military base at Guantánamo Bay.

The Treaty of Paris had also ceded U.S. control over a number of former Spanish possessions: Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippine Islands.

The U.S. acquisition of the Philippines set off a fierce debate. Prominent individuals, including Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie, joined with the Anti-Imperialist League in denouncing this shift in American policy. Some opponents were idealistic, believing that the U.S. was acting in an undemocratic manner; others argued more pragmatically that keeping overseas colonies was too expensive, that the cost of keeping military forces abroad would outweigh any other benefits. Still others struck a racial note, suggesting that inevitably the people of this region would become U.S. citizens, and that as dark-skinned Asians or Hispanics, they were undesirable.

This debate was heightened by events in the Philippines. Just like the Cubans, the Filipino people had been struggling for some time to secure their independence from Spanish rule. Initially they had greeted the Americans as liberators, but when it became clear that the U.S. intended to stay, a rebellion broke out. This war, lasting several years, led to the deaths of 18,000 rebels and over 4,000 American soldiers. It's estimated that another 200,000 Filipino civilians died as a result of the conflict. Ironically, the United States ended up using some of the same anti-guerrilla techniques that they had protested against when Spain had used them in Cuba.

Despite the controversy and the war, the U.S. government persisted in maintaining control over the Philippines. Supporters argued that keeping these islands would help provide access to the markets of Asia, and that it was the moral duty of the United States to "civilize" the people of these islands and teach them the ways of democracy. It was not until 1946 that the islands would be allowed full independence.

The Spanish-American war signaled growing American influence in both the Pacific and in Latin America. Another example can be found in the acquisition of the Panama Canal.

It had long been the dream of the U.S. to create a canal through the isthmus which joined South America to North America to facilitate trade between the Atlantic and the Pacific. The ideal location lay in the Colombian province of Panama, but the Colombian government proved reluctant to negotiate a treaty, demanding that the U.S. pay a high price for this concession. Infuriated, Pres. Theodore Roosevelt sidestepped the Colombians by encouraging a revolution in Panama. The newly created nation quickly gave the U.S. what it wanted: a 99-year lease on a 10 mile wide zone to build and maintain the envisioned canal.

President Roosevelt aggressively extended American power elsewhere in the Caribbean. In 1904 he enunciated what became known as the "Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine." He noted that both the United States and various European nations had economic interests in Latin America that were

adversely affected by political turmoil and corruption in the region. Since under the Monroe Doctrine the United States would not allow any European power to intervene in the Americas, it was up to the U.S. to guarantee the stability of Latin America: to act as the "Policeman of the Caribbean". For the next twenty years the U.S. followed up on this with aggressive interventions in Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. In Nicaragua, for instance, U.S. troops entered the country in 1912 and remained there as peacekeepers more or less consistently until 1933. The same thing happened in Haiti which witnessed an American occupation for most of the period between 1918 and 1934.

William Howard Taft, who succeeded Roosevelt as President, followed a slightly more nuanced path in foreign diplomacy. Taft emphasized what became known as "Dollar Diplomacy". He believed that U.S. policy should be focused on opening up new business opportunities and markets overseas, particularly in Latin America and Asia. American investments would also provide, he suggested, a powerful way to influence the course of nations in these regions without necessarily resorting to military intervention: dollars instead of bullets.

Taft himself was followed by Woodrow Wilson, who came into office espousing the highest ideals. Wilson sincerely believed in the power of American style democracy and liberalism -- he rejected both Roosevelt's model of direct intervention and Taft's Dollar Diplomacy. Seeking to formulate a new relationship with Latin America, Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, offered a conciliatory treaty to Colombia which paid them \$25 million dollars as an indemnity for the loss of Panama and an American apology. While the Senate refused to ratify the treaty, it clearly indicated Wilson's desire to repudiate the heavy-handed techniques the U.S. had used in the past to dominate this region. He asserted that it was the right of all nations to choose their own governments freely and democratically. Yet, Wilson's idealism did not prevent him from utilizing force when he thought it necessary. When Haiti became engulfed in domestic turmoil in 1915, Wilson sent in troops, as he did in the Dominican Republic in 1916.

An even greater trial of Wilson's idealism came in Mexico. For decades Mexico had been ruled by the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. In 1910, however, a revolution broke out and he was replaced in the Presidency by Francisco Madero, who espoused democratic principles and a desire to institute genuine reforms. Madero in turn was murdered by Gen. Victoriano Huerta who quickly assumed control of Mexico. When President Wilson came into office in 1913 he demanded that Huerta hold elections and re-establish democracy in Mexico. When Huerta refused, Wilson took steps to oust him from power. He attempted to stop arms shipments to Huerta's regime and in April 1914, after a minor incident between Mexican troops and American sailors in Tampico, he ordered the U.S. military to seize control of the Mexican port of Veracruz, hoping this would disrupt Huerta's regime. Huerta's defeat by an army led by Venustiano Carranza led to the American removal of the troops. When a new civil war broke out between Carranza and the combined forces of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, Wilson supported Carranza. In retaliation, Villa murdered sixteen American citizens in Mexico and staged a raid into New Mexico which killed nineteen more. Enraged by Villa's actions, Wilson ordered the U.S. military to cross the border and capture him. He believed that this mission would be tacitly supported by Carranza, however Villa eluded the American forces and led them deeper and deeper into Mexico. The Mexican

public was outraged by the U.S. intervention and Carranza demanded the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops. Initially Wilson refused, leading to sporadic fighting between Mexican troops and American forces, but he ultimately was able to end the stalemate with a diplomatic solution which included the formal recognition of Carranza's government. The decision to end the confrontation in Mexico may have also reflected Wilson's growing focus on an even more important foreign policy crisis: the raging war in Europe.