

# The Eternal Frontier: How Manifest Destiny Shaped American Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

Since before the founding of the nation, the United States has approached foreign policy from a unique yet consistent perspective. This perspective was fundamentally ideological, rather than rational, and universal in its ambitions. Perhaps no other great power has allowed ideology to shape its foreign policy to an equal degree as in the United States. This spirit has gone by many names through the years, such as “Manifest Destiny,” “Leading the Free World” and “Democratic Enlargement.” While many historians see these ideals as distinct and unrelated, they all stem from a common ideology which has always informed American foreign policy decisions. This paper will discuss the development of that spirit throughout the 19th century, and in doing so, demonstrate that the United States was never truly an isolationist power. Having described the birth of American foreign policy, the paper will compare American foreign policy principles of the 19th century to that of the 20th and 21st centuries. The commonalities between these visions demonstrate that American foreign policy philosophies developed not on the beaches of Cuba or the fields of France, but in the Appalachian Mountains, the Great Plains, and the deserts of Mexico. The ideological foreign policy created during the 19th century persists to this day, and will continue to define American interactions with the world for many years to come.

## Introduction

For the past thirty years, the United States has occupied a remarkable position in worldwide geopolitics. Never before has one country exerted so much power on such a global scale. However, this was not always the case. For much of its history, the United States was a relatively small power, with little global influence. Traditionally, historians have viewed the period between 1898 and 1945 as the most transformative era in the history of American foreign policy. In that time, so the story goes, the United States went from being an isolationist country with little real interest in the outer world to becoming a global superpower with armed forces deployed in every inhabited continent. This process, according to many historians, took place

through American involvement in the Spanish-American War and the World Wars, which awakened a moral and strategic imperative in the minds of the American public to begin playing a leading role in world politics.

It is true that the United States' role in the world changed fundamentally between 1898 and 1945. The United States' economy grew rapidly, and the nation acquired expansive overseas holdings through the Spanish-American War. The World Wars devastated Europe and opened the door for a new world superpower. However, all these changes obscure the fact that although the material *ability* of the United States to influence world affairs was transformed during this period, the fundamental *motivations* and *ideology* of the United States changed little. This paper will document how these motivations and ideology came about.

Perhaps the clearest example of the orthodox view of American isolationism is found in Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy*, the former Secretary of State's authoritative 900-page history of modern international relations. In his book, Kissinger points out what he sees as the fundamental contradiction of American foreign policy. "No country has influenced international relations as decisively and at the same time as ambivalently as the United States.... No country has been more reluctant to engage itself abroad even while undertaking alliances and commitments of unprecedented reach and scope."<sup>1</sup> Kissinger concludes that since the beginning of American history, "American thought has oscillated between isolationism and commitment."<sup>2</sup>

For Kissinger and many other American historians, the first and longest period of isolationism lasted from the founding of the nation until 1898, when the United States seized Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and numerous other Caribbean and Pacific Islands from Spain after the Spanish-American War.

Kissinger sums up this first period of American foreign policy in a single sentence. "Until the turn of the twentieth century, American foreign policy was basically quite simple: to fulfill the country's manifest destiny and to remain free of entanglements overseas."<sup>3</sup> However, in summarizing the nation's goals in a few rational and discrete points, Kissinger underestimates the power that ideology exerted over American foreign policy.

## **Manifest Destiny**

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<sup>1</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Kissinger, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Kissinger, 34.

Textbooks and popular commentators often define Manifest Destiny as the idea of the United States gradually expanding from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean over the course of the 19th century. Inevitably, this involved conflict with Native Americans, as well as Mexico. However, by the 1890s, with the settling of the frontier, Manifest Destiny had been “achieved” and the idea was set aside.

This idea is manifestly incorrect. Manifest Destiny was a vague term, but a highly universalist one. It envisioned not just control of the land currently comprising the modern-day continental United States, but of the entire North American continent, and farther still. This expansive spirit was not secret, but highly publicized among advocates of Manifest Destiny. Journalist John O’Sullivan’s 1845 article “Annexation,” famous for coining the phrase “Manifest Destiny” is striking in its ambition. Not only does the article predict the seizure of land from Mexico and the Native Americans, but it concludes by predicting the annexation of Canada, and eventually the domination of Europe.

Away, then, with all idle French talk of *balances of power* on the American Continent. There is no growth in Spanish America! Whatever progress of population there may be in the British Canadas, is only for their own early severance of their present colonial relation to the little island three thousand miles across the Atlantic; soon to be followed by Annexation, and destined to swell the still accumulating momentum of our progress. And whosoever may hold the balance, though they should cast into the opposite scale all the bayonets and cannon, not only of France and England, but of Europe entire, how would it kick the beam against the simple, solid weight of the two hundred and fifty, or three hundred millions—and American millions—destined to gather beneath the flutter of the stripes and stars, in the fast hastening year of the Lord 1945!<sup>4</sup>

O’Sullivan’s definition of Manifest Destiny thus extends far beyond what one might expect of an “isolationist” nation. While the scope and expansionism of O’Sullivan’s piece are surprising enough, the reader is also struck by his prescience. In the year 1945, a hundred years after O’Sullivan’s writing, American soldiers would be in Europe, rebuilding the world order into one dominated by the United States.

It is important to remember that O’Sullivan’s piece does not view American expansionism as a cynical power grab. Rather, he portrays the expansion as a sacred American duty, inextricably tied to American democracy and ideology. Elsewhere in the piece, he writes, “it may perhaps be required of us as a necessary condition of the freedom of our institutions, that we must live on forever in a state of unpausing struggle and excitement.”<sup>5</sup> For O’Sullivan,

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<sup>4</sup> O’Sullivan, *Annexation*.

<sup>5</sup> O’Sullivan, *Annexation*.

the frontier did not end at the Pacific, nor even the shores of the American continents. The United States had a destiny to promulgate its ideology and control throughout the world.

It is important to emphasize that these views were not held by O'Sullivan alone, nor did he invent them. Rather, O'Sullivan merely put a name on a concept long held by Americans, one that, in fact, predated the revolution itself.

### **The Origins of Manifest Destiny**

The unique history of the United States' development likely contributed to the country's unusual conception of international relations. The Puritans, among the first English settlers to arrive in the Americas, were steeped in the idea of a special divine mission. Yet this mission was also inherently expansionist. The Puritans aggressively spread their faith, and hoped that God had "peopled New England in order that the reformation of England and Scotland may be hastened."<sup>6</sup> Over time, the Puritans' idealism blended with those of other settlers to create a potent new ideology, one which espoused Christian faith, political liberalism, democracy, free trade, and western civilization, among other ideas. In time, ideology of American expansionism would become socialized further, adding such diverse motivations as the spread of slavery or the assertion of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority.

This paper will not glamorize the ideological motivations of early American settlers. Doubtless, most modern Americans would find parts of the original ideology of their nation repulsive, yet the values have remained central to the American identity up to the present day. However, historians like Kissinger are often hesitant to use these values to explain American foreign policy calculations. However, historians like Robert Kagan have pointed out that, "The foreign policy of a liberal republic could no more be divorced from the principles of liberalism and republicanism than an eighteenth-century divine-right monarchy could be divorced from the principles of divine right and monarchical legitimacy."<sup>7</sup> These values are crucial for an understanding of American foreign policy decisions.

Geographic factors in turn made this developing American ideology exceedingly expansionist and universalist. The early settlers found themselves in a vast, sparsely populated continent. The only people who could oppose the settlers' expansion were Native Americans, whom the settlers promptly began to expel with brutal and decisive force. In no other part of the world would expansion have been so easy as it was in North America. In Europe, the new

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<sup>6</sup> Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Kagan, 72.

American ideology might have been compromised by harsh geopolitical realities, but in North America, the settlers began to develop the idea that their ideology could expand indefinitely, eventually overtaking the entire world.

This expansionism would eventually contribute to the American Revolution. Contrary to popular belief, many Americans cared little about British taxes, since the taxes were typically levied on luxury goods like stamps or sugar. However, the British Proclamation of 1763, banning settling beyond the Appalachians, sparked outrage among colonists, who saw expansion as a fundamental necessity for the nation.<sup>8</sup>

Kissinger writes that “The dominant view in the early days of the Republic was that the nascent American nation could best serve the cause of democracy by practicing its virtues at home.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the actions of the young republic suggest differently. After independence, United States expansionism escalated once again. The history of the early United States is characterized by aggressive moves against not only Native Americans but also European powers, motivated by a combination of liberal ideals not yet summarized in the term Manifest Destiny. Some of these such as the Monroe Doctrine are well known and will not be discussed here. Yet others are more obscure, and a close examination of them will paint a more vivid picture of American expansionism.

The American seizure of Florida from Spain, for example, was technically the product of the 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty. Yet a closer look at the seemingly peaceful event demonstrates far greater aggression on the part of the United States. The Spanish government felt forced to sign the treaty because, the year before, Florida had been invaded by American general Andrew Jackson. Jackson had acted upon his own authority, entering under the pretext of attacking the Seminole tribe and escaped slaves, yet the invasion panicked Spanish officials, who were powerless to prevent it. In the end, the Spanish decided to cut their losses and sell the land to the United States.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Louisiana Purchase was not just a move of negotiating acumen, but of French understanding that if they did not sell the land to the United States, the United States would inevitably invade and seize it anyway. Napoleon wrote, “I will not keep a possession which will not be safe in our hands, that may perhaps embroil me with the Americans.”<sup>11</sup> Napoleon’s fears were well justified, for only a few years after the Louisiana

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<sup>8</sup> Kagan, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> “Acquisition of Florida: Treaty of Adams-Onis (1819) and Transcontinental Treaty (1821).”

<sup>11</sup> Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, 134.

Purchase, the United States declared war on Great Britain, in large part to seize and incorporate Canada into the fast-growing nation.

This repeated aggression against European powers who, by any measure, far outstripped the United States in military strength, weakens the standard narrative that the United States sought to remain disengaged from Europe. Americans were happy to challenge powerful imperial nations when they felt that their expansionist liberal ideology demanded it.

These conflicts were not even limited to the North American continent. Although it has become a footnote in American history, the 1801-1805 Barbary War was a crucial moment on the United States' road toward global dominance. Fought on the shores of North Africa, thousands of miles away from the United States, it demonstrates the commitment of the young United States to promulgating its values not just in North America, but globally. The Pasha of Tripoli triggered the war when he began capturing American trading ships in the Mediterranean. Rather than paying tribute (as many European powers did at the time) the United States decided to build a navy and force the Tripolitans into submission, in order to, in the words of one diplomat, "protect our trade, and to compel them if necessary to keep faith with Us."<sup>12</sup> The war proved successful, although the United States had to blockade Tripoli for four long years, even forming temporary alliances with the neighboring kingdom of Sicily for supplies and ships (which in itself stands as a counterexample to the myth that early America shunned European alliances). For a young, supposedly "isolationist" nation, this kind of global reach was nothing short of remarkable. The United States spent huge sums on its new fleet, sums which far exceeded the amount it would have paid as tribute for the same outcome. In the end, however, the war was only won by a land force of American marines and Greek and Turkish mercenaries, who threatened to attack Tripoli directly.<sup>13</sup> While many Americans associate sending ground troops and mercenaries to the Middle East to be a symptom of modern American foreign policy, the use of these tactics in the Tripolitan War, a mere seventeen years after the ratification of the Constitution, speaks eloquently to the global nature of American foreign policy, even before the United States was a global power.

Many historians have pointed out the irony that the Tripolitan War was waged by President Thomas Jefferson, who, according to the standard narrative, was more concerned with American agriculture and westward expansion than in foreign affairs, as exemplified by the Louisiana Purchase. However, Jefferson's concern with the Barbary pirates actually stemmed

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<sup>12</sup> Church, "To Thomas Jefferson from Edward Church."

<sup>13</sup> Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, 123.

from many of the same ideals as the Louisiana Purchase. Both illustrated American expansionism and eagerness to flex its muscles. While historians are tempted to put westward expansions and disputes over free trade into two separate categories, they both put into practice essentially the same philosophy: that of Manifest Destiny.

The American devotion to free trade extended well beyond just fighting pirates. Historian Jonathan Den Hartog argues that the aforementioned War of 1812 began for two main reasons, because of American desire to seize both Canada and Native American controlled land to the West, (both of which were aligned with Britain) and because of British restrictions on American trade with France. The latter outraged the American public, and the slogan “free trade and sailor’s rights” became a common slogan for supporters of the war.<sup>14</sup>

In the conventional story of American foreign policy, historians typically describe American protection of global free trade as a product of World War Two. As foreign affairs expert Tim Marshall writes, “The Second World War changed everything.... As the world’s greatest economic and military postwar power, America now needed to control the world’s sea-lanes, to keep the peace and get goods to market.”<sup>15</sup> Yet the Barbary War and War of 1812 demonstrate that the United States did not limit its ideological ambitions to North America. Even as a weak and newly-born nation, the United States believed in the global application of its political and economic ideals, and would go to great trouble to see them recognized by others.

Another example of American universalist expansionism came in the form of a uniquely American phenomenon: the filibusters. The filibusters were a type of military adventurers, not unlike Spanish conquistadors, who set out to conquer new lands in the name (though without the permission of) the United States government.<sup>16</sup> Filibusters attempted to seize Latin American territories such as Cuba and Colombia, often with the hope of eventually incorporating them into the United States.<sup>17</sup> However, the filibusters’ ambitions extended still farther, with expeditions planned for Hawaii and Ireland. Perhaps the most successful filibuster was William Walker, who after a failed attempt to rule over parts of northern Mexico, actually seized control of Nicaragua in 1856 and ruled it with the help of an American mercenary army. While there, he forced the population to speak English and adopt American customs. Although the Nicaraguan people soon overthrew Walker’s government, the United States protected Walker and allowed

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<sup>14</sup> Hall, Charles, and Johnson, *America and the Just War Tradition*.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> The congressional term “filibuster” stems from the military filibuster phenomenon, because of the military filibusters’ perceived lack of deference to authority.

<sup>17</sup> Pruitt, “Hundreds of 19th Century Americans Tried to Conquer Foreign Lands. This Man Was the Most Successful.”

him to return home.<sup>18</sup> On numerous occasions during their careers, Walker and other filibusters were put on trial for their violation of the 1818 Neutrality Act, which they had clearly broken by planning invasions of other countries from American soil. However, juries proved unwilling to convict filibusters of their crimes.<sup>19</sup>

Filibustering as a profession was deeply ideological. Like Manifest Destiny itself, filibustering stemmed from both a desire to spread American political systems to the rest of the world, and a negative racialized view of other countries. O'Sullivan himself, after coining the term Manifest Destiny, was best known for his role in encouraging and organizing filibustering expeditions. The *New Orleans Daily Creole*, writing in support of William Walker's invasion of Nicaragua, imagined "bold pioneers imposing Anglo-American institutions" upon the "feeble descendants of the once haughty and powerful Spaniard."<sup>20</sup> Other journalists described Walker's expedition as "a heroic effort to spread Liberty and Civilization."<sup>21</sup>

It must also be noted that the expansion of slavery was a significant motivator for many filibusters. One of Walker's first edicts as President of Nicaragua was the restoration of slavery to the country, where it had been forbidden for decades. Many filibusters hoped that by creating and incorporating more slave states into the Union, they could tip the Senate in favor of slave states. However, so strong was the spirit of private expansionism that even anti-slavery northerners participated in filibustering expeditions. Hundreds of New Yorkers signed on to fight for William Walker in Nicaragua and, in the 1830s, northern filibusters launched a number of large-scale attempts to seize Canada from Britain.<sup>22</sup> The universal American acceptance of filibustering as a tool of expansion illustrates just how pervasive and ambitious the idea of Manifest Destiny was in 19th century American culture.

While filibustering was not practiced solely by Americans (Giuseppe Garibaldi is an excellent example of a non-American 19th century filibuster), the vast majority of filibustering expeditions in the 19th century were American. Historian Robert E. May estimates that during much of the 1850s, there were several filibustering expeditions being organized at any given time, with thousands of Americans involved.<sup>23</sup> Filibustering was thus a deeply American phenomenon, rooted as it was in the culture, ideology, and geography of the United States.

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<sup>18</sup> "William Walker | American Adventurer."

<sup>19</sup> May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld*, 234.

<sup>20</sup> May, 113.

<sup>21</sup> May, 115.

<sup>22</sup> May, 80.

<sup>23</sup> May, 67.



A common trend in American expansionism is the important role played by individuals such as Andrew Jackson, William Walker, or the thousands of less famous settlers, pioneers, and filibusters rather than by the deeds of the central government. As a result, historians like Kissinger can often disregard the former actions as not representative of the national will or deliberate policy. Yet that misunderstands a fundamental aspect of the American style of expansion. American ideology, particularly in the first half of the 19th century, was suspicious of large government and preferred a spirit of “rugged individualism.” The government deliberately stepped aside to allow individuals to act in violation of international law. Texas, for example, gained independence from Mexico after a revolution by American settlers who had illegally immigrated from the United States. The United States government secretly encouraged this kind of behavior because it allowed for American expansion while creating plausible deniability for the American government. For example, while the government officially opposed the actions of filibusters, numerous senators and governors secretly aided or even financially supported the efforts of filibusters.

Kissinger’s characterization of 19th century American diplomacy as fundamentally intended to “fulfill the country’s manifest destiny and to remain free of entanglements overseas,” is only half true. Manifest Destiny was so overriding and expansive that it often overruled the second part of Kissinger’s claim. The United States threatened war with Spain over Florida, and actually went to war with Britain over Canada.

Furthermore, Kissinger misunderstands the geographic scope of Manifest Destiny. He seems to see it as the desire to control the land which the United States ended up possessing. Kissinger notes that 19th century American leaders were “tempted” to “translate [the country’s power] into global influence” by annexing the Dominican Republic or Cuba.<sup>24</sup> Yet Kissinger suggests that the fact that the United States did not directly attempt to involve itself in these regions until 1898 proves the strength of 19th century American isolationism. However, this line of reasoning is seriously flawed. Kissinger sees a potential seizure of Cuba and the Dominican republic as global expansionism, but lets the invasion of Mexico, the conquest of the West, the 1868 purchase of Alaska, and countless other examples of American expansionism seem normal and predetermined. This kind of analysis represents a serious blindspot in how historians see 19th century American expansion. Historians see projects like Westward expansion as *domestic* issues, because the territories ended up being an integral part of the United States. But to the American public at the time, seizure of Cuba might well have been

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<sup>24</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 37.

seen as no more expansionist than that of Texas or Alaska. William Walker's invasion of Nicaragua was, at the beginning, no stranger than the activities of the Texan revolutionaries. In fact, just like in Texas, thousands of Americans immigrated to Nicaragua during William Walker's brief presidency, with long term goals of settling and "Americanizing" the region. In short, there was nothing predetermined about the geographical course of American expansion.

Some academics have noted the aggressive nature of early American foreign policy. The famous realist theorist John Mearsheimer, for example, calls it "an expansionist power of the first order."<sup>25</sup> However, Mearsheimer uses the history of the early United States to argue that states and governments don't hesitate to use aggression to achieve their geopolitical aims. Mearshiemer's theory of government is misapplied in the case of the United States, because although American expansionism was certainly aggressive, it was by in large not the product of government operations. Rather, it was taken by the initiative of many individual actors. Mearsheimer discounts the roles of ideology, and culture in his explanation of American expansionism, and focuses solely on geopolitical expediency, which, as shown previously, was only a part of the calculations made by American officials, pioneers, and filibusters. Mearsheimer's approach shows the limitations of using a macro political science approach to understand American expansion.

In 1893, as the continental American frontier became more populated, a sense grew in some sections of the population that the period of American expansion was over. In his famous frontier thesis, historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that although the existence of the frontier had been essential to the creation of the American identity and state, "the frontier is gone, and with its going closes the first period of American history."<sup>26</sup> Historians typically use Turner's piece to show the end of Manifest Destiny and of its ideological foundation. Yet Turner's work actually represented a far more subtle shift. Although the days of direct territorial expansion were over, the underlying motivations of the expansion, to spread American ideas and ideology as far as possible, remained the same. In fact, Turner unknowingly acknowledges that point in his frontier thesis. He writes that "the most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy here and in Europe."<sup>27</sup> Even Turner implicitly believed that the United States had a central role to play in the ideological development of the world. That belief would persist in the minds of both the American public and the government.

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<sup>25</sup> Mearshimer, "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics," 238.

<sup>26</sup> "Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

<sup>27</sup> "Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

## Manifest Destiny in the 20th Century

In the period between 1898 to 1945, the United States became involved in several major wars, acquired extensive colonies and foreign allies, and became increasingly important in geopolitics. However, these developments did not represent a fundamental shift in the ideology and overall goals of American foreign policy, because, as discussed above, American foreign policy had already been both territorially acquisitive and concerned with wider world politics. What did, however, change between 1898 and 1945 was the United States' relative power and influence. By 1945, the very year prophesied by O'Sullivan, the United States was poised to act upon the values it had developed during the 19th century. In that sense, the 20th century represents the very same concept of Manifest Destiny, applied on a global scale. That trend continues to the present day.

A lengthy analysis of the major events of American foreign policy viewed through this lens would be far too lengthy and repetitive, so this paper will limit itself to a few key examples.

United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, better known as NSC-68, remains one of the most important national security documents in American history. Drafted by the State and Defense Departments in 1950, it was, in the words of Henry Kissinger, "America's official statement on Cold War Strategy."<sup>28</sup> NSC-68 defined American foreign policy for a period of four decades, and its institutional influence remains to this day.

Since NSC-68 was written by national security experts for the benefit of government officials, rather than the general public, one might expect it to appeal to hard-nosed global realities, rather than idealism or ideology. Yet NSC-68 is steeped in the very same vision of manifest destiny. It depicts the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union as a war of ideology, where "a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere."<sup>29</sup> It goes on to argue, in the aftermath of the Soviet coup in Czechoslovakia, "When the integrity of Czechoslovak institutions was destroyed, it was in the intangible scale of values that we registered a loss more damaging than the material loss."<sup>30</sup> This sort of ideological grand strategy was not just the product of Cold War propaganda. People at the highest levels of government genuinely believed that the Cold War would be won not just by American arms, but by American ideology. It was this ideological conception of the war which actually led to many of the greatest strategic mistakes of the Cold War, such as the Vietnam War. In short, the

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<sup>28</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 463.

<sup>29</sup> "NSC-68 United States Objectives and Programs for National Security."

<sup>30</sup> "NSC-68 United States Objectives and Programs for National Security."

American ideological conception of foreign policy was capable of overriding even rational global strategy.

That fundamentally ideological conception of the Cold War combined with an expansive global outlook. "It is only by practical affirmation, abroad as well as at home, of our essential values, that we can preserve our own integrity, in which lies the real frustration of the Kremlin design." In a sense, NSC-68 positions the development of liberal values in other countries as just as vital to American interest as liberal values at home. In doing so, NSC-68 committed the United States to advocating democracy and liberal values worldwide, overruling the words of other experts such as Walter Lippmann who advocated the United States pick its battles against the Soviet Union on a case-by-case basis.

Even Henry Kissinger remarked upon NSC-68's unprecedented scale and ideological focus. "Never before had a Great Power expressed objectives quite so demanding of its own resources without any expectation of reciprocity other than the dissemination of its national values."<sup>31</sup> Yet what historians like Kissinger miss is that while NSC-68 may be unique in the global history of international relations, it is consistent with centuries of American foreign policy principles. It is impossible to fully understand NSC-68 without also studying Manifest Destiny. Both NSC-68 and Manifest Destiny saw the universal export of liberal values as essential for the moral and physical survival of the United States.

Not coincidentally, at the same time as the writing of NSC-68, the American public was beginning to look back with nostalgia on its original ideals of Manifest Destiny. The 1950s are often described as the "golden age of the western."<sup>32</sup> During the 50s, more Westerns were made than all other genres of film combined, and the genre remained the most popular in America for decades to come. Visions of the old west, typically sanitized and glamorized, underlined the American ideal of perpetual and irresistible expansion of civilization and democracy. Often, filmmakers drew direct connections between the old west and contemporary foreign policy. For example, John Wayne's 1960 film *The Alamo* is typically seen by critics as an explicit articulation of the director's anti-communist values, because of the film's overwhelming focus with freedom and democracy as principles worth dying for.

It is worth underscoring that the Western as a genre (and, by extension, the idea of Manifest Destiny) was a crucial component of both the historical and contemporary American

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<sup>31</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 463.

<sup>32</sup> Indick, *The Psychology of the Western*, 2.

psyche, and no equivalent genre exists anywhere else in the world.<sup>33</sup> Even as the popularity of Western films have decreased, the image of the western remains. Many Americans during the 1980s, for example, associated a kind of rugged Western individualism with President Ronald Reagan, in part because he had acted in many Western films during his film career. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ronald Reagan was also famously aggressive in his foreign policy, which included an enormous military buildup and, just like William Walker 130 years before, a proxy war in Nicaragua.

### **American Expansionism in the 21st Century**

In the present day, NSC-68 no longer has any formal weight, but the ideals it espoused remain the linchpin of American foreign policy. President Bill Clinton advocated “democratic enlargement” in the post-Cold War world, and declared that, “our overriding purpose must be to expand and strengthen the world's community of market-based democracies.”<sup>34</sup>

The 21st century has given observers no reason to believe that the United States will ever willingly step back from its ambition of aggressively exporting its ideology throughout the globe. The invasion of Iraq was perhaps the most important foreign policy decision of the 21st century, and also the most indicative of the original spirit of Manifest Destiny. President George W. Bush’s famous “mission accomplished” speech stands as a good example of the kind of ideological expansionism which has always characterized American diplomacy.

Men and women in every culture need liberty like they need food and water and air. Everywhere that freedom arrives, humanity rejoices and everywhere that freedom stirs, let tyrants fear.... Our commitment to liberty is America's tradition, declared at our founding, affirmed in Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, asserted in the Truman Doctrine and in Ronald Reagan's challenge to an evil empire.<sup>35</sup>

While today many politicians criticize Bush’s decision to invade Iraq, the underlying assumptions which informed the decision remain present in American discourse, just as they have since before the founding of the nation. In a recent foreign policy speech, President-Elect Joe Biden declared that “As president, I will ensure that democracy is once more the watchword

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<sup>33</sup> The closest equivalent would probably be Russia’s “Eastern” genre, which tell stories set during the country’s eastward expansion into Siberia.

<sup>34</sup> “Address by President Bill Clinton to the UN General Assembly.”

<sup>35</sup> “President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended.”

of U.S. foreign policy.... We must restore our ability to rally the Free World – so we can once more make our stand upon new fields of action and together face new challenges.”<sup>36</sup>

Biden’s speech sounded as though it were describing a transition toward the United States playing an active role in the ideological development of the world. But in reality, the ideas Biden describes never truly went away. The export of liberal ideologies has always been a fundamental part of American foreign policy, perhaps even more so than rational geopolitical concerns.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that American foreign policy philosophies did not undergo a radical transformation during the first half of the 20th century. Rather, the United States had spent the early centuries of its history developing a uniquely universal and expansive ideology, which exerted enormous influence over how the nation determined its foreign policy. The crucial shift of the early 20th century was material rather than ideological. After 1945, the United States finally had the power to fully implement the principles of liberal hegemony which it had already developed. The United States was able to develop this uniquely focused ideology, because of its unique origins and geography. The original settlers developed the idea of liberal expansion, and the favorable geography of the Americas guaranteed that the United States has never had to resort to the more pragmatic and hard-nosed European style of diplomacy.

When discussing a topic as broad as American foreign policy, there are always counterexamples to a particular argument. And it is true that American foreign policy has not championed aggressive expansion and export of its ideology on every occasion. The period of relative isolation between the World Wars, or the support of undemocratic coups and in Iran and Latin America, all stand in opposition to the course described in this paper. Yet when viewing the broad sweep of American history, it seems clear that these instances are exceptions to the rule. Even today, although the US has close relations with a number of undemocratic states, such as Saudi Arabia, it typically justifies these ties in ideological language, pointing out, for example, that Saudi Arabia has a vital role in fighting terrorism and securing prosperity for the Middle East.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, while it is difficult to assess the motivations of policymakers, it seems likely that these sorts of alliances exist at least in part for ideological reasons. As evidence, one may point out the many strategically inoffensive dictatorships with the United States felt

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<sup>36</sup> “July 11, 2019 - Joe Biden Foreign Policy Speech at The Graduate Center at CUNY in New York.”

<sup>37</sup> “U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia.”

compelled to help liberal revolutionaries fight against, such as Libya in 2011 and Syria from 2011 to the present day.

Some contemporary commentators, such as political scientist Stephen Walt, have gone to great lengths to dispel the idea of American exceptionalism. While Walt is correct in stating that the United States has often been in the moral wrong, he misunderstands a crucial point. American settlers believed that their nation was exceptional, and had the ability to act upon that idealism with few restrictions, further strengthening exceptionalism. Paradoxically, American conviction in American exceptionalism did, in some way, make the United States exceptional, because it resulted in a morally confident and self-righteous country.

American foreign policy has always been unique and so historians and commentators, particularly in America, have often failed to grasp its essential oddity, much as a fish fails to appreciate its watery surroundings. As Kissinger writes, "American leaders have taken their values so much for granted that they rarely recognise how revolutionary and unsettling these values appear to others."<sup>38</sup> Virtually no other western country has ever pursued a policy as universalist or expansionist as the United States. In the balance-of-power system of Europe, any state that acts aggressively and unilaterally has time and time again been defeated by coalitions. Only in the geographically isolated and sparsely populated American continental mass could so irrational and ideological a philosophy have arisen without being strangled in its crib by powerful rivals and coalitions.<sup>39</sup>

The essential inflexibility of American diplomacy will have important implications for the future. As of today, the United States' relative power in the world is decreasing, and the world order which the United States created in its own image may soon decay. By understanding the fundamental principles which have shaped American foreign policy, it seems clear that it would take a tremendous shift in culture and self-image before the United States willingly withdraws from its role as an exporter of its ideology. Regardless of the exact future of world politics, it seems clear that the United States' ideology will continue to exert a powerful, yet often misinterpreted, hold over the nation's policy.

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<sup>38</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Kissinger, 30.

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