

The Manifest Destiny of the U.S. and Beyond to World War II

By Arnold August, October 2011

The Monroe Doctrine (initiated in 1823) was followed in a similar manner for more than the next century by the Manifest Destiny (initiated in the 1840s), ensued by the Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, then President Taft's pretext for expansion throughout Latin America and the Caribbean "by virtue of our superiority of race."¹ Woodrow Wilson, in the face of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, proposed "making the world safe for democracy." Franklin D. Roosevelt's (F.D.R.) Good Neighbor Policy was the next orientation. As one heads toward World War II, one must note the initial U.S. support for fascism. For example, Ambassador Henry Fletcher (U.S. Ambassador to Italy, 1924–29) expressed the opinion as follows that was to guide U.S. policy not only toward Italy, but elsewhere for many years: "Italy faced a stark choice ... either 'Mussolini and Fascism' or 'Giolitti [a leading Italian progressive personality] and Socialism.'" This support for fascism was at the very least "acceptable," if not fully endorsed, until such time that Germany and Italy challenged the interests of the U.S. and the U.K.² When the U.S. finally joined the allies in World War II, F.D.R. articulated the ambition of the U.S. to be the "great arsenal of democracy,"³ which would be used as an instrument for U.S. policy after the war.

These antecedents and their successive expressions, outlined above, ran as a common thread in U.S. foreign policy, even as the political parties in the White House changed. Given their importance, it is worthwhile to examine them more closely. This evolution is key to grasping an important feature of how democracy in the U.S. operates.

The Monroe Doctrine served as the guiding light for much of the nineteenth century. It was also shouldered by the Manifest Destiny doctrine elaborated by a New York journalist, John L. Sullivan, and used by the Democrats to support their plan to annex Texas. The terms "manifest" (apparent) and "destiny" (inexorable) bring to mind the original Pilgrims/Puritans' religious backing for expansion and superiority as the chosen people. Sullivan first touched upon the issue in a 1939 article where he refers to the U.S. as "destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles.... We are the nation of progress, of individual freedom."⁴ Sullivan was more explicit when, in 1845, he wrote to oppose the politicians rejecting the annexation of Texas as those who were "limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by

Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”⁵

The end of that century witnessed the 1898 U.S. intervention in the Cuban War of Independence. The twentieth century did not temper the civilizing zeal of the U.S. not only toward the Indigenous peoples within its own territory, but also in Latin America. What is known as the Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, the right to intervene militarily, was enunciated by President Theodore Roosevelt during his Annual Message to Congress on December 6, 1904. He indicated that

the progress of the Indians [Indigenous peoples in the U.S.] toward civilization, though not rapid, is perhaps all that could be hoped for in view of the circumstances.... [Turning to Latin America] chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and ... may force the United States, however reluctantly ... to the exercise of an international police power.... [Providing the U.S. intervention in Cuba as a positive example, Roosevelt continues:] If every country washed by the Caribbean Sea would show the progress in stable and just civilization which with the aid of the Platt Amendment Cuba has shown since our troops left the island ... all question of interference by this nation with their affairs would be at an end. [With regards to the Philippines] I firmly believe that we can help them to rise higher and higher in the scale of civilization and of capacity for self-government ... and able to stand, if not entirely alone, yet in some such relation to the United States as Cuba now stands.⁶

President Taft confirmed U.S. pretensions over Latin America when he said in 1912, based once again on the racially superior notions of the chosen people, that

The day is not far distant when three Stars and Stripes at three equidistant points will mark our territory; one at the North Pole, another at the Panama Canal, and the third at the South Pole. The whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as, by virtue of our superiority of race, it already is ours morally.⁷

To appreciate the continuation of the above outlook as later encountered in two of the next main protagonists in U.S. presidential international policies, that of Woodrow Wilson (1913–21) and F.D.R. (1933–45), one has to take into account an event that shaped the century: the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. Russia had become revolutionary; however, it was not perceived by the civilized West to be a legitimate source of new ideals and policies. “Russia had been Europe’s original ‘third world,’ declining relative to the West up to World War I while serving the standard function of providing resources, markets, and investment opportunities.”⁸ Following up on Taft’s infamous remark about “our superiority of race,” Wilson perceived the Filipinos as “children [who] must obey as those who are in tutelage.” It is thus not surprising that Wilson (after likewise regarding Italians “like children” who must be led and assisted) and other subsequent U.S. presidents offered support to Mussolini’s fascism for crushing the progressive movement in that country. For example, F.D.R. spoke of Mussolini as “that admirable Italian gentleman.” In fact, the business circles in Europe and the U.S. were interested in investing in both Italy’s and Germany’s growing armament industries as their bases of fascism leading up to the war. During this period, the rise of fascism was regarded favourably in the U.S. and the U.K., because it not only allowed for Western economic investment, but also acted as a buffer against the left-wing, progressive and social movements in Germany and Italy, and in their own countries.

The allusion by O’Sullivan to principles of democracy (“progress, of individual freedom”) as a foundation for the Manifest Destiny of the U.S. cited above was deepened and made more explicit by President Woodrow Wilson. In declaring U.S. participation in World War I, he gave as the main rationale for the U.S. that “the world must be made safe for democracy.”⁹ Wilson said on December 7, 1920, in his Annual Message to the Congress and in the context of the end of World War I that¹⁰ (emphasis added)

this is the mission upon which Democracy came into the world.... Democracy should prove its purity and its spiritual power to prevail. It is surely the *manifest destiny* of the United States to lead in the attempt to make this spirit prevail.... The [U.S.] is of necessity the sample democracy of the world, and the triumph of democracy depends upon its success.

The “Good Neighbor Policy” came about in 1933 when F.D.R. was attempting to salvage the faltering U.S. reputation following methodical and repetitious military interventions in Latin America, as well as the domestic economic crisis. He said in his Inaugural Address on March 4, 1933, that he opposed “unscrupulous money changers,” “evanescent profits” and “material wealth as the standard of success,” and he spoke in favour of the need to “put people to work.”¹¹ F.D.R. continued:

In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of good neighbor — the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others — the neighbor who respects his obligation and respects the sanctity of his agreements.

It may be helpful for readers to keep in mind, for the purposes of evaluating the contemporary export of the U.S.-type democracy under the guise of one benevolent pretext or another, the following important 1935 event in Nicaragua in the wake of this Good Neighbor Policy. Augusto Sandino was a Nicaraguan revolutionary who led a revolt against the U.S. military occupation of Nicaragua between 1927 and 1933. As a result of the Good Neighbor Policy and mass protests in U.S. streets against the presence of their country there (the type of events that resulted in the Good Neighbor Policy in the first place), the Marines eventually left the country in January 1933 at a time when a large part of the country was under the control of Sandino’s guerrillas. The National Guard was turned over to Somoza, who was close to the U.S. Ambassador Arthur Bliss Lane. A negotiation took place with Somoza and Sandino, assuring the latter that Somoza would not take action against Sandino. However, after a conversation with Ambassador Lane, Somoza ordered his troops to capture Sandino and executed him that same day, February 21, 1934. This was followed by a roundup and execution, lasting several weeks, of many of the leading Sandinistas as well as Sandinista-inspired cooperative farmers and their families. “Somoza told his officers [that] ‘American Ambassador Arturo Bliss Lane has assured me that the government in Washington supports and recommends the elimination of Augusto César Sandino.’” In 1936, Somoza took over full control of the country through a coup against President Sacasa.¹²

According to other sources, despite repeated requests from U.S. Ambassador Lane, Washington refused to make public

declarations discouraging Somoza from undermining the Sacasa government:

The story had been leaked that Lane had ordered the killing of Sandino [but] “had done so in league with U.S. officers.... Somoza cultivated the image of himself as Washington’s man and the stony silence from the State Department encouraged Nicaraguans to believe the image was true. [While Sacasa was still President, his wife] informed Lane that her husband was going to ask Somoza to resign as head of the National Guard and that aircraft from El Salvador and Honduras would bomb his headquarters if he refused. The State Department intervened quickly to stop the president’s plan.”¹³

On December 29, 1940, in his address to announce, finally, armament support for the allies, F.D.R. evoked the “Monroe Doctrine [which] was conceived by our government as a measure of defense in the face of a threat against this hemisphere by an alliance in Continental Europe.” He concluded that the United States “must be the great arsenal of democracy.”¹⁴

¹ Taft, William Howard. 2009. In Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 154.

² Chomsky, Noam. 2003. *Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance*. NY: Metropolitan Books, p. 64–68.

³ Roosevelt, Franklin D. 1940. “The Great Arsenal of Democracy.” *American Rhetoric* (December 29). At <http://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/FDR%20-%20Arsenal%20of%20Democracy.pdf>.

⁴ O’Sullivan, John L. 1839. “The Great Nation of Futurity.” *The United States Democratic Review* (November), 6:23, p. 427.

⁵ ———. 1845. “Annexation.” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (July–August), 17:1, p. 5–6.

⁶ Roosevelt, Theodore. 1904. “State of the Union Message.” (December 6). At <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/images/research/speeches/sotu4.pdf>.

⁷ Taft, op. cit., p. 154.

⁸ Chomsky, op. cit., p. 70.

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- ⁹ Wilson, Woodrow. 1917. "Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War Against Germany." The American Presidency Project (April 2). At <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65366#axzz1d4TSqcw3>.
- ¹⁰ Wilson. 1920. "8th Annual Message." The American Presidency Project (December 7). At <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29561#axzz1d4TSqcw3>.
- ¹¹ Roosevelt, Franklin D. 1933. "Inaugural Address." The American Presidency Project (March 4). At <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=14473#axzz1YmDbAj5O>.
- ¹² Cockcroft, James D. 1996. *Latin America: History, Politics, and U.S. Policy*. (2nd ed.) Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, p. 207.
- ¹³ Bulmer-Thomas, Victor. 1996. "Nicaragua Since 1930." In Leslie Bethell (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Latin America, VII, 1930 to the Present*. NY: Cambridge University Press, p. 332–33.
- ¹⁴ Roosevelt. 1940, op. cit.