

# Liberty at Home, Not Crusades Abroad

For over 100 years after its founding, the United States avoided foreign aggression, knowing such actions would lead to endless problems. Then we veered off course.

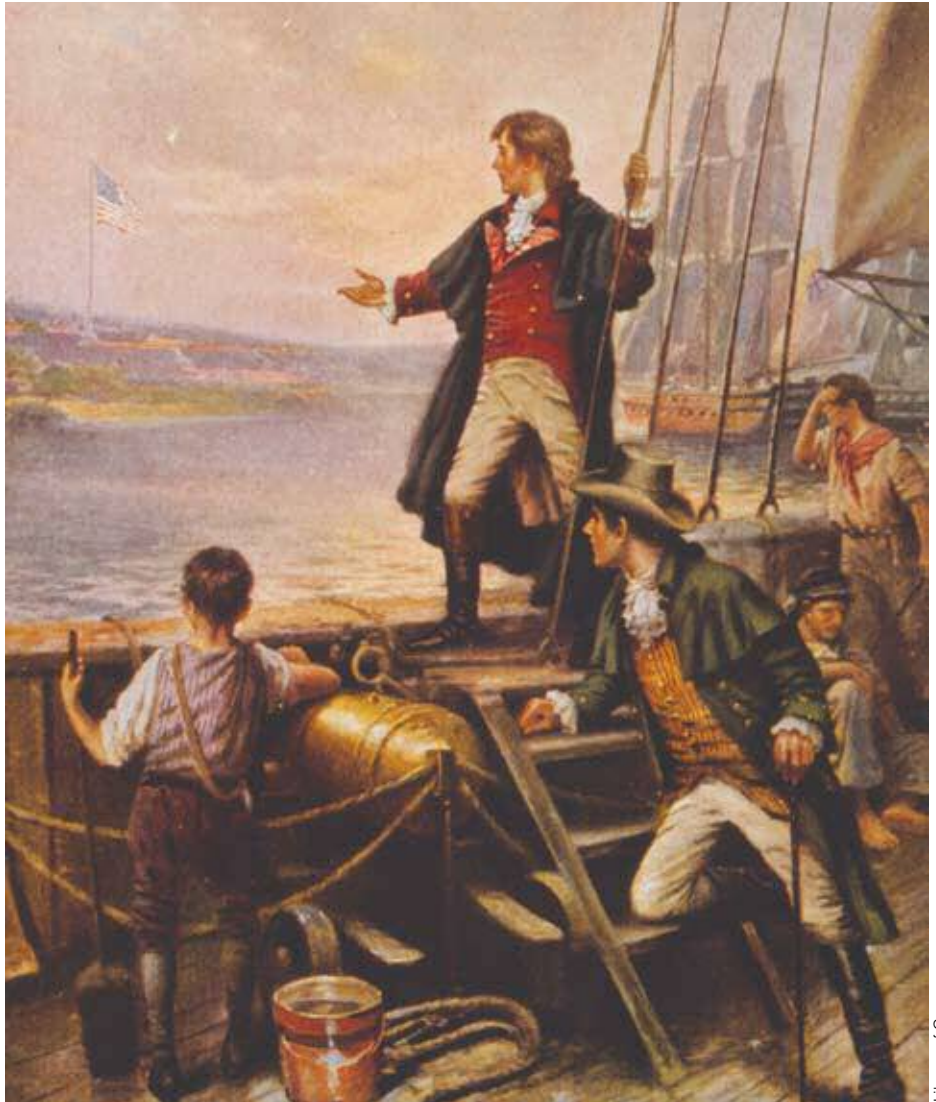
by *Michael E. Telzrow*

Watching the bombardment of Fort McHenry from the vantage point of the British ship where he was held captive, American patriot Francis Scott Key anxiously spied the star-spangled banner through the dawn's early light. The moving scene prompted him to put to words a poem he titled "Defence of Fort McHenry." The fourth stanza of that poem encapsulated the stakes that compelled McHenry's garrison to withstand the might of the British armada and keep the flag flying at all costs:

O! thus be it ever, when freemen  
shall stand  
Between their loved home and the  
war's desolation!...

During the War of 1812, freemen did stand, and their stand preserved our beloved country. Key's stirring words describing that stand at Fort McHenry in 1814 were set to music and are of course known to us as the "Star-spangled Banner," our National Anthem. And what an anthem it is! Just as Key was moved by personal observation to pen his famous words, one generation of Americans after another has been moved to experience the heartfelt sensations of what it means to be an American by Key's beautiful words set to music.

America once again finds itself embroiled in a war, a "modern" war. Instead of defending our country against an encroaching foreign invader, our men and women in uniform have once again been sent far from home for dubious reasons. The ostensible cause for the Iraq War, recall, was to find and destroy Saddam Hussein's reputed weapons of mass destruction. It was not to attack a regime that had attacked us, since Hussein, unlike al-Qaeda, did not have anything to do with the 9/11 terrorist attack. When the reputed WMDs were not found, our war aims shifted to nation building.



**Francis Scott Key**, author of the "Star-spangled Banner," searches the horizon over Fort McHenry for a sign of victory. In 1814, the beleaguered American garrison withstood an all-night bombardment in defense of the homeland during the second war with Britain.

President Bush's interventionist foreign policy posits that the United States has a unique duty to help Iraqis discover "democracy" amongst the wreckage of Hussein's brutal dictatorship. For Bush, America is an embodiment of an idea that must be exported through force of arms if necessary, not so much a political or communal entity that must be protected. If he

did view our country as a political or communal entity, he would have secured our borders long ago.

The notion that American ideals must be exported to other countries is not new, but it was something that our Founding Fathers considered unwise, and it did not provide the rationale for either our War for Independence or the War of 1812.

Put simply, President Bush’s grand strategic vision does not find its roots in the Founding Era. Nonetheless, those roots still go back many years — certainly to the Spanish-American War in 1898, which could arguably be called our first imperialistic war.

But even though America has increasingly engaged in foreign interventionism and nation building, there is no reason why we should not or could not once again adopt our traditional foreign-policy doctrine — where, if we must go to war, it would be for the purpose of defending our own country.

### The Founders’ Doctrine

Our Founding Fathers and their successors throughout much of the 19th century viewed the United States as a land and culture set apart from the rest of the world. George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson believed that our country’s greatness stemmed from what we did at home, not what we might do in faraway lands. The benefits of our constitutional republic and economic free enterprise were not to be exported to other lands through foreign adventurism, but should instead serve as shining examples to nations that lacked such admirable attributes.

Washington and Hamilton both warned against involvement in foreign wars and intrigues. In his Farewell Address of 1796, Washington cautioned Americans: “Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachments for others should be excluded, and that in place of them just and amicable feelings toward all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.”

Washington asked rhetorically in his Farewell Address: “Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by intervening our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and pros-

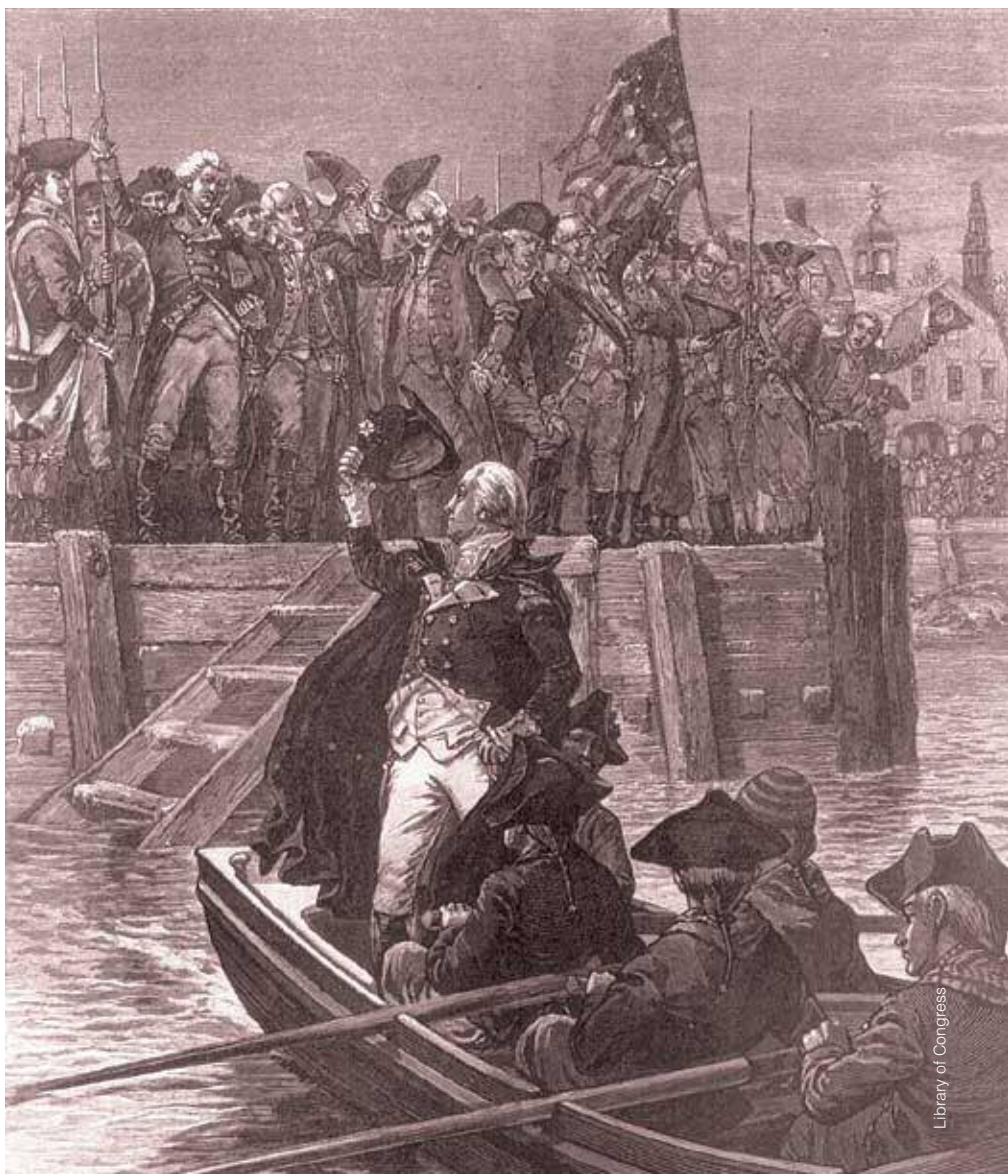
perity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?” Why indeed? But Washington was not recommending isolationism. He supported commercial relations, and in general he recommended: “Observe good faith and justice toward all nations. Cultivate peace and harmony with all.”

Hamilton echoed Washington’s sentiment against entangling alliances when he penned a similar admonition: “It is very material that while we entertain proper impressions of particular cases of friendly or unfriendly conduction of different foreign nations towards us, we nevertheless avoid fixed and rooted

antipathies against any, or passionate attachments for any, instead of these cultivating, as a general rule, just and amicable feelings towards all.”

The cause for Washington’s and Hamilton’s warnings stemmed from unrest in Europe that threatened to spill over into the

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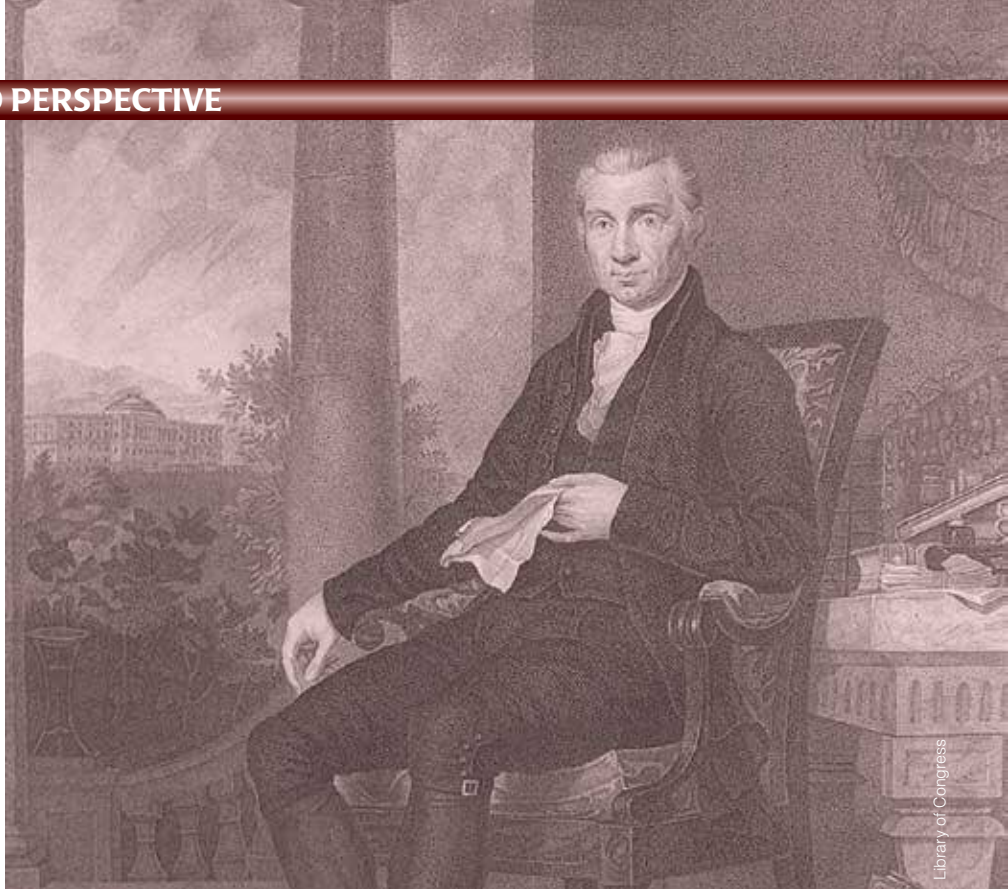
**Before leaving office,** George Washington advised his countrymen to avoid entangling the nation’s interests with those of the great European powers.



American continent, as well as England's refusal to evacuate their frontier forts in the Northwest Territory, and her penchant for impressing American sailors on the high seas. France and Spain were engaged in war, and the seemingly never-ending Anglo-French animosities were poised to erupt again in armed conflict. In any case, neither Washington nor his successor Adams wanted to go to war with England or France. Washington knew that the United States was in no position to go to war with Britain, or any other European power. So he pushed for ratification of John Jay's controversial treaty with England which eliminated British control of their western forts but forced the United States to relinquish neutrality on the high seas. Under the treaty, American ships suspected of carrying supplies to Britain's enemies were still subject to interdiction by British naval ships, and Jay's treaty also failed to resolve the issue of impressments of American sailors. Jay was hung in effigy by some Americans who felt his treaty was pro-British, but his treaty did postpone the inevitable conflict with Britain until 1812, at which time the Americans were better prepared.

When John Adams took office in 1797, he faced a popular backlash as a result of what many perceived as Washington's pro-British policies. Relations with France had deteriorated badly. The French, the saviors of Yorktown, had naturally expected the Americans to come to their aid in their perennial wars with Britain. But the bloody revolution in France and a hardening policy of nonintervention kept the United States from siding with the French. Matters were made worse when French naval privateers began to harass American merchant ships. For two years, America and France fought a quasi-war at sea with U.S. naval ships engaging French vessels when they could. Adams refused to push for a declaration of war, and by 1800, he was successful at working out a new treaty with France in which that country accepted U.S. neutrality rights at sea and released it from its mutual defense obligations formed during the War for Independence.

The die had been cast. The United States would not shrink from protecting its interests but it would not pick sides in European conflicts, and the thought of forcibly exporting its governmental virtues or distributing aid abroad was unheard



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**James Monroe's** famous foreign-policy doctrine sought to erect barriers to foreign interference in American affairs. It was the culmination of American foreign-policy development that sought to set America apart from the world.

of. Years later, Adams' son, John Quincy Adams, our sixth president, would write succinctly of the philosophy which would guide America until 1898, "America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."

### **American Liberty the Watchword**

American liberty was the watchword which informed and guided Americans during most of the 19th century. It was during this period that America expanded her borders, fought a civil war, and emerged as a transcontinental power of economic strength unrivaled in the world — all while managing to avoid involvement in continental wars and idealistic foreign policies. Walter McDougall, author of *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter With the World Since 1776*, writes that American exceptionalism, unilateralism, the Monroe Doctrine (against outside encroachments into our hemisphere), and Manifest Destiny (on behalf of our westward expansion) were "designed by the founding fathers to deny the outside world the chance to shape America's future."

McDougall argues that American exceptionalism was never about forcing others to be like us or about pursuing moral foreign policies. It was about defending the United States from foreign threats. In McDougall's words it meant, "Liberty at home, not crusades [abroad]."

Manifest Destiny, a term first used in 1845 by John L. O'Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*, was embraced by Americans almost immediately. O'Sullivan argued that the vast tracts of western lands stretching to the Pacific Ocean belonged to the republic "by right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self-government entrusted to us." Divine Providence had elected the American people, according to O'Sullivan, to spread republicanism and liberty across the continent. Americans believed in Manifest Destiny not because they necessarily wanted to bring American-style liberty and government to other lands, but because they knew that acquiring these lands would preclude foreign interference in their affairs. Manifest Destiny ran up against territorial

claims of Britain and Mexico, but Americans had no desire to export the virtues of a free and republican self-government — they wanted the land for other reasons.

America's territorial expansion led to conflict with Mexico in 1846, after Mexico refused an American offer to purchase California. A small skirmish on the Rio Grande in which Mexican troops ambushed American troops led to a declaration of war on May 13, 1846. After decisive victories in California and General Winfield Scott's daring invasion of Mexico, Mexican forces were forced to capitulate. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded the Mexican territories of California and New Mexico to the United States.

Besides adding a sizeable chunk of territory to the United States, the war is notable in a sense that it illustrates America's traditional doctrines of unilateralism and expansionism. At no point did the United States ever contemplate exporting its republican ideals to the Mexican state. Indeed, there was a rather unseemly belief that the Mexicans were incapable of aspiring to such an advanced level of liberty. McDougall again writes that there was never an impulse "to reform a wicked world." The war was defensive in nature and part of a wider approach, along with

the Monroe Doctrine, that countered attempts of European countries to "come over to America." The primary objective was to secure and protect America from intrusion, not to force American ideals upon our southern or northern neighbors.

When America purchased Alaska from a somnolent Russia, it did so for economic reasons and to extend its buffer against foreign powers over the North American continent. Contrary to common perceptions, America was engaged not in isolationism but in a vigorous policy of expansionism within its immediate geographical sphere.

### Birth of an American Empire

And so it remained until the late 19th century, when America broke from its traditional moorings and began to acquire territories beyond its natural and continental borders. More disturbing was the abrupt rejection of the warnings from the Founding Fathers to avoid searching for "monsters to destroy." America's war with Spain in 1898 was exactly what Washington, Jefferson, and Adams had managed to

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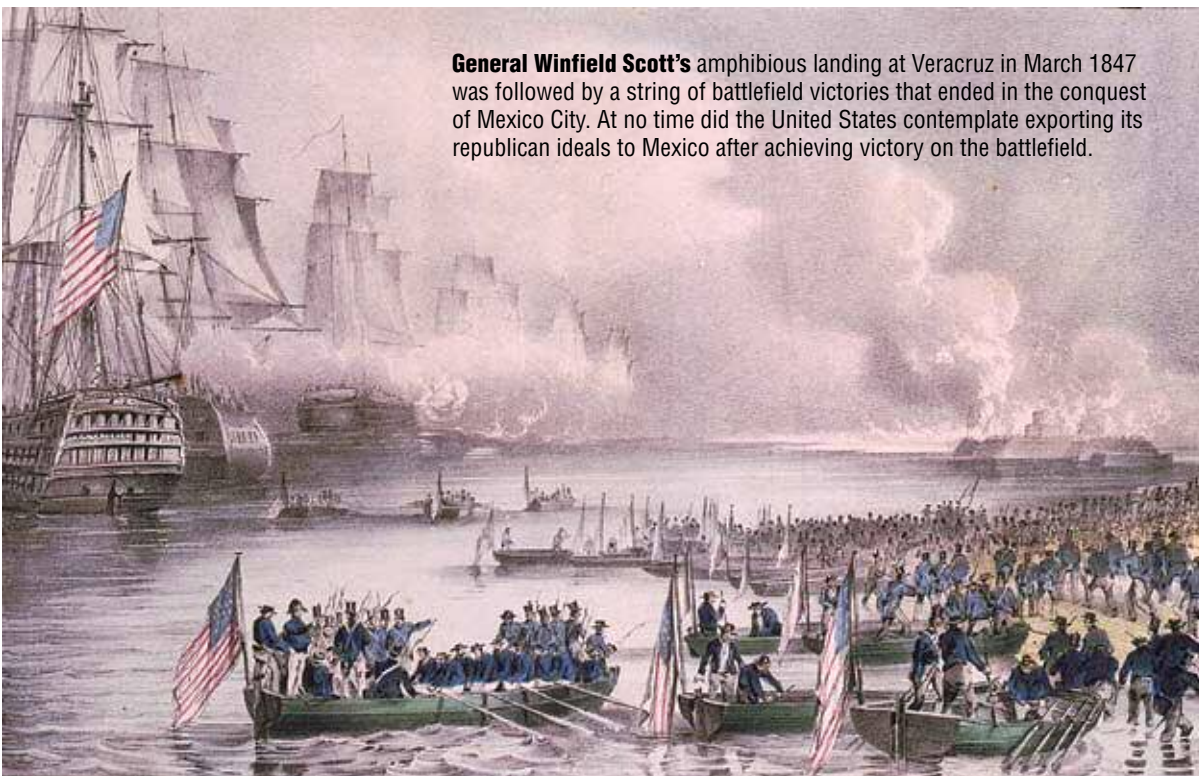
avoid and had warned against. American politicians, including President William McKinley, capitalized on popular sympathy for Cubans struggling in a revolutionary war of independence against Spain to enter the fray. At once Americans who traditionally and wisely avoided foreign conflicts were swept into a war in order to slay a dragon that posed no threat to the United States.

A trumped-up incident involving an engine room explosion on the battleship *U.S.S. Maine* provided the pretext for entering the war. The media and eager politicians were complicit in convincing Americans that the *Maine* had been sunk by an explosion detonated by the Spanish in Havana Harbor. The "yellow press" whipped up American

passions with reports of Spanish atrocities and on April 25, 1898, McKinley had his formal declaration of war. Author Mark Twain and industrialist Andrew Carnegie denounced the unusual intervention as blatant imperialism.

Once again U.S. forces were successful. Admiral Dewey's impressive victory over the Spanish at Manila Bay was followed by victories in Cuba and Puerto Rico. On December 10, 1898, Spain and the United States signed a peace treaty ending the conflict. Spain relinquished its claim to Cuba and ceded Puerto Rico and

**General Winfield Scott's** amphibious landing at Veracruz in March 1847 was followed by a string of battlefield victories that ended in the conquest of Mexico City. At no time did the United States contemplate exporting its republican ideals to Mexico after achieving victory on the battlefield.





**America's new mission in which it sees itself as the protector of every citizen in the world is a self-destructive endeavor that, if continued, will not only complete the transformation of our republic to a global empire but will lead to national bankruptcy and the loss of our liberties.**

Guam to the United States. Additionally, the United States acquired the Philippines for \$20 million. The latter came with a native insurrection that lasted until 1902 and claimed the lives of 4,234 Americans.

In one fell swoop, America had traded its time-honored traditions that had kept us safe in return for entanglements in foreign wars and native insurrections in a drive for hegemony. It would only get worse, as Woodrow Wilson's vision of the United States as a world savior was lurking on the horizon.

### **Wilsonian Doctrine**

By 1900, America had adopted a new foreign-policy doctrine that favored an imperialist and interventionist approach. Combining themes of racial superiority, social progressivism, and a newly defined national destiny, imperialists like Albert J. Beveridge called for "the regeneration of the world" through American expansion. Gone was the doctrine of American exceptionalism and neutrality. It was this non-traditional crusading mission that compelled America to enter the First World War.

Woodrow Wilson spoke in terms of mission and Manifest Destiny as he laid out his vision of America in the new century. In Wilson's first inaugural speech he spoke of the need for the government to achieve social justice. This translated to America's role in world

affairs, and Wilson imagined America as the guarantor of justice for all the peoples of the world. Speaking at a memorial service for Marines killed at Veracruz, Mexico, Wilson referred to the slain warriors as Americans "who have gone down to Mexico to serve mankind if we can find out the way. We do not want to fight the Mexicans. We want to serve the Mexicans if we can."

When war came to Europe in 1914, Wilson maintained an air of neutrality, but the American financial, diplomatic, and material aid he sent to France and Britain revealed a less-than-neutral approach. When he ran for reelection in 1916, he promised to keep us out of war, but that of course turned out not to be the case. Then, when American troops were sent to Europe, Wilson promised to make the world "safe for democracy" — a not-too-vague admission that American troops would not be used to protect our own country but to build a new global empire.

Since the time of Woodrow Wilson, many other presidents have carried out his doctrine to varying degrees. This particu-

larly includes the current occupant of the White House, George W. Bush, who has repeatedly argued that we must spread democracy globally and who has even used the word "crusade" to describe his Wilsonian vision.

America's Founding Fathers had a much more humble understanding of America's role in global affairs. They hoped that America might serve as a shining example of self-government under the rule of law, guided by a Constitution of self-limiting powers. They were not uncomfortable with the idea of pursuing a foreign policy based purely on national interests — one in which the safety and well-being of the country was central to its doctrine. But they harbored no dreams of exporting our form of government, and the thought that America would someday assume the mantle of savior of the world would have shocked them to their core.

America's new mission in which it increasingly sees itself as the protector and provider of every citizen in the world is a self-destructive endeavor that, if continued, will not only complete the transformation of our great republic to a global empire but will lead to national bankruptcy and the loss of our cherished liberties. ■



**One hundred years** of American foreign-policy tradition was swept away when President McKinley asserted American interests in a war for independence between Cuba and Spain. The spoils of war included some far-flung colonies along with a nasty native insurrection in the Philippine Islands.