American imperialism

There are few documents by great founders of nations that are more appealing to the modern mind than George Washington’s Farewell Address to his compatriots. He wrote it in 1796 in order to describe his experiences for the benefit of the nation. He departed from public life in the same calm and cheerful mood he had shown in stormy circumstances, and the prize for his hard and dangerous work was the justified hope of having laid the foundations of a free and powerful republic.

He could imagine the growth of the Union: the North with its industry, the South with its production of raw material, and the East in lively commercial intercourse with the West. And this growth and change alarmed the otherwise so optimistic spirit of the American founding father. He feared that the strengthened Union would follow the way of the European states and mingle in their quarrels and intrigues. The consequence would be the introduction of ‘overgrown military establishments which,
under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to
be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty’. He therefore added:
‘The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending
our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as
possible…. Why by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe,
entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rival-
ship, interest, humor or caprice? It is our true policy to steer clear of perma-
nent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.’²

This advice by Washington represented the first principle of American for-
eign policy. The second principle was established by President Monroe in his
famous message of 2 December 1823. The Monroe Doctrine consisted, as is
generally known, of the following two points: 1) any attempt by European
powers to extend their rule over any part of the American continent would be
regarded by the Union as a hostile act; and 2) the American continent could
no longer be regarded as an object of colonisation by any European power.
Those principles of Washington and Monroe have until now been the basis of
American diplomacy.

The year 1898 witnessed a complete turnaround. Dewey’s cannons in
Manila announced to the world the death of the Spanish colonial empire and
birth of the new American diplomacy. American democracy, which Alexis
de Tocqueville considered five decades ago so firmly established, gave way
to imperialism. In the equality of conditions Tocqueville saw the source of
American life, and this equality has now been wasted.

Political democracy presupposes a certain economic equality. And wher-
ever we see democratic principles implemented in a complex society, we can
be sure that a formerly oppressed class has become a powerful factor. But, as
long as the struggle of that class is unsuccessful, it strengthens the tendency
to imperialism created by economic inequality and accelerates its crystallisa-
tion. This phenomenon gives liberal writers the opportunity to complain that
the social-revolutionary movement is the cause of imperialism. This reproach
is, however, completely unfounded. It rests on the fallacy: *post hoc ergo propter
hoc*.³ Imperialism and socialism only go together to the extent that they spring
from the same sources: the growing economic inequality. And the growing

². Washington 1796.
³. ‘After this, therefore because of this.’