

## **The Nineteenth Century French Debate over “American Imperialism”**

**Dr. Inès Boufarès**

*English Assistant at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sousse, Tunisia.*

---

American Imperialism, this much debated topic, has always been of paramount interest for observers throughout the world. Actually, this ongoing debate involving U.S. foreign policy is not a recent one since it goes back to the end of the nineteenth century, specifically to the outbreak of the Spanish-American war of 1898. In fact, in the wake of this military conflict, the world witnessed the emergence of a young superpower on the international scene challenging and competing with old European powers including France. Thus, in July 1898, after the end of the Spanish-American war the term “imperialism” was, for the first time, applied to the United States by most European observers, mainly the French. But the latter were divided regarding the genesis of American imperialism. A debate was then launched among French observers revealing different perceptions of this phenomenon.

---

In the context of researches about Anglophone and Francophone intercultural relations and given the abundance and diversity of French primary and secondary sources dealing with the topic of the genesis of American Imperialism, I decided to investigate it. Regarding the choice of sources, the official French viewpoint was intentionally ignored since the French government preferred to remain neutral in the Spanish-American conflict. Consequently, French politicians couldn't openly express their support for either country. So, focus will be exclusively on the viewpoints of French intellectuals contained in available periodicals and published research works, mainly Ph.D. dissertations issued between 1898 and 1908. The choice of this decade was not arbitrary since the time interval stretches from the outbreak of the 1898 war and the launching of the debate on American imperialism, to the year when the world lost interest in the war and its aftermath.

Thus, primary researches revealed two major but contradictory viewpoints. The first one, which represents the majority, was utterly convinced by the novelty of American imperialism, and that the shift in the foreign policy of the United States, from isolationism, previously influenced by the Monroe doctrine, to imperialism, could be explained only by a new American interpretation of the doctrine. Conversely, for the minority of French analysts, the United States has always been imperialist, and this policy was nothing but the pursuance of its early expansionist policy and a consequence of its “Manifest Destiny” ideology.

So as to better assess this phenomenon, I will try to shed light on the US's emerging imperialism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the lenses of contemporary French Media. Thus, in the first part of this article, I will present and try to analyze the viewpoint which believed in the novelty of this phenomenon. In the second part, focus will be on the viewpoint which believed in the initial existence of an American imperialism in the early history of the United States.

### **I. AMERICAN IMPERIALISM IS A NEW PHENOMENON: THE SHIFT OF THE “MONROE DOCTRINE” FROM A DEFENSIVE TO AN OFFENSIVE DOCTRINE**

Before 1898, mainly after the adoption on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1823 of President James Monroe's doctrine (quoted in Cazemajou 144-145), the United States used to be perceived by the rest of the world as an isolationist country, confining itself to the American continent and refusing any mingling in the European affairs. Thus, utterly convinced by the non-interventionist policy of the US, most French observers of the time seemed shocked when they discovered the belligerent attitude of the United States towards Spain, concretizing in a declaration of war by the former and ending by the victory of the United States and its acquisition of the remaining Spanish territorial possessions. In fact, this part of French opinion could not explain the sudden interest of the United States in territories situated thousands of miles away from its borders. In 1890, the American census bureau declared the “end of the frontier” but, few years later, in April 1898, the United States declared war on Spain, a European imperialist power, a war the aim of which was to free Cuba from Spanish domination. Surprisingly enough, the isolationist U.S. started annexing the overseas territories of the defeated Spain. Then, for most French journalists, the acquisition of territories, such as the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico and Hawaii, revealed the birth of a new U.S. imperialist foreign policy. Regarding Cuba, with the adoption of the Platt amendment, the island had become politically and economically tied to the U.S.; a kind of a protectorate.

Americans who, till then, isolated themselves on the American continent and tried to avoid direct confrontations with European powers, bar the one with Great Britain in 1895 which had been brief and did not lead to an open war, were becoming imperialists. Americans, who used to declare that they had always been strongly opposed to colonialism and imperialism given their former status of a British colony and consequently refused to subjugate other nations to their power, were adopting the policy of an aggressive colonial power.

Indeed, for the pro-colonial specialist review *L'Économiste français*, “The US, which seemed enclosed between the Atlantic and the Pacific, [...], a nation known for being peaceful and positive, uninterested in glory, appearing as a quiet democracy, is extending beyond the two oceans and raising its flag on the most important and distant islands and archipelagoes” (Leroy Beaulieu 250). *Le Journal des économistes* also commented on the radical change of the US foreign policy. According to the writer, Americans are “overexcited”, an attitude opposite to their former “wise and steady” one. For the journalist of *Le journal des économistes*, “it is no longer a mystery; the US is adopting a colonial policy. The annexation of Cuba and the Philippines was a first step in this path” (Rouxel 73).

Moreover, regarding the serious and widely-read newspaper *Le temps*, surprisingly enough, it openly commented on the Spanish-American conflict and violently attacked the “belligerent” (1) attitude of the American Congress. By supporting Spain and due to its lack of neutrality, *Le Temps*, as the unofficial spokesperson of the officially neutral French government, translated the French government’s concern about the new threat that the US represented to the French overseas colonies.

Moreover, added to the big number of comments establishing a strong link between American imperialism and the new American interpretation of the Monroe doctrine, the latter was the object of three Ph. D. dissertations defended in French faculties. Joseph Patouillet in his Ph.D dissertation defended in 1904, was convinced by the initial defensive nature of the Monroe doctrine. He declared that “[...] it was, in fact, in the mind of Monroe a mere defensive formula asking for the respect of newly-independent [Latin] Republics, the expression of a perfectly legitimate right of ‘self-defence’, [and] the instinct of ‘self-preservation’” (238-239).

Similarly, according to J. Patouillet the Monroe doctrine ended up losing its isolationist nature under President William McKinley in 1898 who twisted its original meaning so as to justify the US acquisition of overseas territories. Thus, the new “offensive” Monroe doctrine had become the source and “foundation of [American] imperialism” (238-239). For Joseph Ribet, another scholar and journalist, the doctrine “opens up a horizon of great domination [over the rest of the world], this is the real Monroe doctrine” (19).

Thus, most contemporary observers, attributed the contradiction between the isolationist 1823 Monroe doctrine and the imperialist US policy under President William McKinley (in 1898) to the flexibility of the doctrine. They stated that the US presidents who succeeded to James Monroe, mainly John Tyler in 1841 and James Polk in 1845, started providing a totally new interpretation of the Doctrine. In fact, changes had been made, not at the level of the text itself but at the level of its interpretation by “a new generation of politicians no longer inconspicuous and cautious, like the founders of the Republic, but yet in a hurry to fulfill the ambitions of the ever growing Union” (Moye 193).

Consequently, the Monroe Doctrine paved the way for an expansionist and more aggressive one later named the Polk Doctrine. The latter was named after President James Knox Polk who was the President of the US from 1845 to 1849. President Polk was famous for his policy of expansionism and annexation which significantly contributed to the enlargement of the US territory. By 1845, the United States became interested in the acquisition of the territories of North Oregon, Texas and Yucatan. In fact, on the occasion of the annexation of Texas, President John Tyler made reference to the Monroe Doctrine to justify his act. Actually, the US, as put by M. Moye, “[fearing] a European intervention in Texas, decided to absorb this country to prevent any possible colonization on the American soil” (194).

Thus, from a defensive doctrine supposed to protect the independence of the Latin American republics from European colonization, the Monroe Doctrine was transformed into an offensive one which aimed, on the one hand, at safeguarding its own interests by practicing its “right” on the whole hemisphere and, on the other, at expanding overseas.

Consequently, the expression “America for Americans” used by the French media before 1898 as a reference to the original Monroe doctrine, was no longer relevant and was transformed during the 1898 war with Spain and the territorial acquisitions that followed, into “The world for Americans” (Laferrière 243). The American foreign policy was, in fact, violently criticized for it unveiled the real “imperialist” intentions of the US towards, first, Latin American countries and then towards the whole world.

Indeed, the French viewpoint, which believed in the isolationism of the original Monroe doctrine and its transformation under the presidents who succeeded to James Monroe, mainly William McKinley who, unlike his predecessors, started acquiring territories outside the American continent, is confirmed in paragraphs 48 and 49 of the said doctrine. In the latter, the US asserted its decision to keep its distance and avoid intervening in the European affairs. In fact, “In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so” (Cazemajou 144-145). Actually, the Monroe Doctrine, initially implemented by President James Monroe in 1823, was adopted on the occasion of

agreements reached between the United States and the Russian imperial government through “amicable negotiations” the aim of which was to arrange “the respective rights and interests of the two nations of the northwest coast of this continent” (Cazemajou 144-145).

In addition, Monroe’s policy of the timematched the foreign policy of his predecessors, namely President George Washington who in his “Farewell Address” advised Americans to stay away from European problems and avoid intervening in their domestic affairs. In his book, the 20<sup>th</sup> century American scholar Thomas Bailey confirms the existence of an American isolationist policy deeply rooted in the US history:

The essential ideas of the Monroe Doctrine go back deep into the colonial period, and they had been repeatedly foreshadowed, if not definitely formulated by George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers. Monroe, so to speak, merely codified existing ideas like those of the two hemispheres, no transfer of territory, nonintervention and non-entanglement. (Bailey 184-186)

Although most American historians and French journalists believed in the isolationist character of the US foreign policy initially influenced by the Monroe Doctrine, this viewpoint is highly debatable. In fact, one may argue that, the isolationist character of the Monroe Doctrine is extremely questionable and that with or without the Monroe Doctrine the foreign policy of the United States had never been isolationist. As a matter of fact, for other French observers, the allegedly confining Monroe Doctrine was, initially an aggressive and offensive one paving the way for the US expansion on the American continent. Indeed, it was far from being a defensive policy. When the said doctrine announced that the European powers could no longer colonize American countries it did not include the United States in this restriction. On the contrary, under this doctrine, the American continent had become a kind of a US’s “chasse gardée”. Consequently, although representing a minority, this viewpoint was defended by its supporters in a very aggressive way.

## **II. THE UNITED STATES HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN IMPERIALIST COUNTRY: THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1898 WAR WAS NOTHING BUT THE PURSUANCE OF ITS POLICY OF TERRITORIAL EXPANSION**

The French viewpoints regarding the birth of American imperialism were not homogenous. Indeed, as previously mentioned, other French commentators asserted that the imperialist character of the US policy could not be attributed to a new interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine for the latter had never been isolationist and neither was the US throughout its history. For the supporters of this viewpoint, US expansionism goes back to the colonial period and the history of the US is a history of territorial expansion.

In fact, for *La Revue des Deux Mondes*

[...] it is not the first time that the United States enlarges its territory; it had already done it more than once; we can even state that it had never stopped extending at close intervals since its foundation; with the purchase of Louisiana in 1803, that of Florida in 1819, the union of Texas in 1845, the annexation of New Mexico and California at the expense of its southern neighbors in 1848. (Préssensé 78).

In addition, for the *Revue Générale de Droit International Public*, the US considered itself a missionary “whose role is to spread in the world the principles of justice and liberty” (Laferrrière 243). In the same article, the journalist added that “[it is an] imperialist nation called for a greater mission that it cannot ignore without disregarding the views of Providence [...] there’s mysticism in all imperialism” (243).

In *Le Correspondant*, Octave Noël entitled his article “The American Peril” (1081-1104), Augustin Léger named his “The Americanization of the World” (221-253). In the latter, he declared that “Every day, young America shows off new ambitions. Monroe’s famous axiom ‘America for the Americans’ is already outdated in its pretensions, henceforth, its greed is asking for England, Europe and now the world” (221-253).

In fact, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the US tripled its territory either through treaties or purchase. Louisiana was purchased from France and so was Florida from Spain. The US also resorted to wars to acquire other territories mainly from the native peoples and from other neighboring countries such as Mexico (Texas). The policy of territorial expansion to the Pacific was a policy adopted by the US government and encouraged by the majority of Americans. By the 1840s this expansion was even popularized, “as the nation’s Manifest Destiny (its apparently inevitable, divinely determined fate), since it was obviously meant to be, that expansion was also right, argued the expansionists” (Oakland 157).

In fact, to justify their policy of territorial expansion inside the American continent, the US put forward their famous American ideology supporting US territorial expansion, it is the theory of “Manifest Destiny”. This expression was first used in the US in 1845 by the democrat journalist John O’Sullivan. In fact, for many twentieth century authors, “the American expansionism is not new: in 1845, John O’Sullivan stated that the “manifest destiny” of the US was to conquer North America” (Gervais 38). This theory was used for the first time during the rush to the West but its roots go back to the colonial period. Before 1845, the “Manifest Destiny” and the notion of the divine selection can be found in the speech of the first English Puritans who established themselves on the eastern coast of North America: The latter were convinced that, due to the fact that they had been persecuted in England, God sent them to this new land to build, as put by John Winthrop, ‘the city upon a

hill'. [...] for these first immigrants, America represented the refuge of the persecuted and the chosen land by God for the establishment of the New Jerusalem (Marientras 91).

However, the notion of divine selection which was, according to the Calvinist tradition, the privilege of God's elect and the Saints was broadened to encompass all Americans. The latter felt transported by the divine force to accomplish miracles on the American continent. Later, this ideology was used by successive American governments to justify the western expansion, so as to acquire new natural resources necessary for the economic development of the country. Consequently, thanks to the forced appropriation of the native land, the purchase of neighboring territories and annexations, the first thirteen colonies were transformed into a huge territory stretching today from the Atlantic coast in the east to the Pacific coast in the west and from Canada in the north to the Gulf of Mexico in the south.

Besides, after the U.S. frontier reached the Pacific Ocean and following the official declaration of the “end of the frontier” in 1890 by the American government, the US expansionist policy did not stop, it went on and even started an overseas' expansionist campaign, also evoking their famous “Manifest Destiny” theory. Another equally interesting discovery, the American interest in overseas acquisitions does not go back to 1890, in fact, it dates back to 1885, when a group of intellectuals and theorists came up with a number of arguments in favor of an American expansion overseas. According to Julius W. Pratt's book entitled *The Expansionists of 1898: the Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Islands*, “[...] books and essays by Josiah Strong, John Fisk, John W. Burgess, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Henry Cabot Lodge that appeared after 1885, [...] had continuing and growing influence” (Pratt 1-22). In fact, in an article entitled “Manifest Destiny”, which appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, the historian John Fisk stated that it was the destiny of the superior and successful Anglo-Saxon race to colonize and dominate the whole world:

[...]it is enough to point to the general conclusion that the work which the English race began when it colonized North America is destined to go until every land on the earth's surface that is not already the seat of an old civilization shall become English in its language, in its religion, in its political habits and traditions, and to a prominent extent in the blood of its people. The day is at hand when four-fifths of the human race will trace its pedigree to English forefathers, as four-fifths of the white people in the United States trace their pedigree today. (578-590) Equally convinced by the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, Reverend Josiah Strong, a congregational minister, strongly believed that time was ripe for Americans to replace the English as representatives of this race. The latter, according to him, possessed “a genius for colonization”.

This ideology is also found in the words of the American presidents of the time mainly President Theodore Roosevelt who wrote in an article entitled “Expansion and Peace” published in *The Independent* on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1899 that “every expansion of civilization makes for peace. In other words, every expansion of a great civilized power means a victory for law, order and righteousness” (quoted in Roosevelt 45). He also expressed his wishes in a speech made at the Formal Opening of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo on May 20, 1901 as follows: “We all look forward to the day when there shall be a nearer approximation than there has ever yet been to the brotherhood of man and the peace of the world” (quoted in Roosevelt 266).

Likewise, twentieth century American historians, such as David Mauk and John Oakland, also attribute American expansionist policy to the ideology of “Manifest Destiny” and state that

from the earliest colonists, migrants to America have wanted to prove this ‘promise of America’ true to justify their decision to emigrate. Thus grew up the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. This is the belief (rhetorical or sincere) that America's foreign affairs, unlike those of other nations, are not self-interested but based on a mission to offer the world a better form of society (Mauk, Oakland 152-153).

Thus, from a European viewpoint the American motivations were selfish and reveal US greed and materialism whereas from an American point of view it was to spread peace and democracy, a motivation similar to that introduced in the 1840s to promote the annexation of much of what is now the western United States.

In conclusion, it is worthwhile noting that the Spanish-American war triggered a prominent protest campaign among French observers who were against American military intervention in Cuba which gave way to the acquisition by the United States of former Spanish colonies situated outside the American continent. In fact, before 1898, the US used to be perceived as a peaceful power enclosed in the American continent and not representing a threat to European powers as far as their territorial possessions were concerned. However, as soon as the US showed interest in overseas acquisitions, something different was at stake. From a French viewpoint, “America for Americans” had been replaced by “the World for Americans”.

Evidently, the French perception of American foreign policy was not homogenous. Some observers highly appreciated US intervention and saw in the Spanish conflict a war for independence and freedom revealing American selfless and sincere motivations. But the brutality of the war and the subsequent territorial acquisitions shocked most of French commentators who became persuaded that the “grand” republic was nothing but an interested imperialist power like any other European power seeking wealth and power under the guise of “Manifest Destiny” which was supposed to provide freedom and democracy to uncivilized regions.

## WORKS CITED

### Primary Sources :

- [1] Leroy Beaulieu, Paul. "L'expansion nord-américaine". *L'Economiste français* 25 Feb. 1905: 250.
- [2] Fisk, John. "Manifest Destiny". *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Mar. 1885:578-590.
- [3] Laferrière, J. "L'impérialisme aux Etats-Unis". *Revue Générale de Droit International Public* Jan. 1906: 243.
- [4] Léger, Auguste. "L'américanisation du monde". *Le Correspondant* April 25, 1902: 221-253.
- [5] Louis, P. "A propos de la Guerre hispano-américaine". *La Revue Socialiste* May 1898: 613.
- [6] Montferrat, B. de. "La Doctrine de Monroe". *La Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique* Oct. 1903: 383-384.
- [7] Moye, Marcel. "L'impérialisme américain". *Revue Générale de Droit International Public* 1 Jan. 1905: 193.
- [8] Noël, Octave. "Le péril américain". *Le Correspondant* 25 March, 1899: 1081-1104.
- [9] Patouillet, Joseph. *L'Impérialisme Américain*. Paris: A. Rousseau, 1900.
- [10] ----- . "L'impérialisme américain". Diss. University of Dijon, 1904, 388 p.
- [11] Pétin, Hécator. *Les Etats-Unis et la Doctrine de Monroe*. Diss. University of Grenoble, 1900. 447 p.
- [12] Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses*. London, Edinburgh, Dublin and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1901.
- [13] Rouxel, M. "La politique coloniale des Etats-Unis". *Le Journal des économistes* Jan. 1901: 73.
- [14] Ribet, Joseph. *Des transformations de la doctrine de Monroe*. Diss. University of Paris, 1905, 232 p.
- [15] Strong, Josiah. *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1891.
- [16] (unknown author), "Les Etats-Unis et l'Espagne". *Le Temps* 10 April, 1898: 1.
- [17] **Secondary Sources :**
- [18] Bailey, Thomas. *A Diplomatic History of the American People*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts division of Meredith Publishing Company, 1964.
- [19] Cazemajou, Jean. *American Expansionism and Foreign Policy 1885-1908*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1988.
- [20] Gervais, Pierre. *Les Etats-Unis de 1860 à nos jours*. Paris: Hachette, 2001.
- [21] Marienstras, Elise. *Les mythes fondateurs de la nation Américaine : essai sur le discours idéologique aux Etats Unis à l'époque de l'indépendance (1763-1800)*. Paris: François Maspéro, 1976, Editions Complexes, 1992.
- [22] Mauk, David and Oakland, John. *American Civilization: An Introduction*. USA: Routledge, 2002.
- [23] Pratt, Julius W. *The Expansionists of 1898: The Acquisition of Hawaii and the Spanish Island*. The John Hopkins Press, 1936.
- [24] For *La Revue Socialiste* "the six European cabinets [...] already see rapacious Jonathan stretching his hands to grab Jamaica, Guadeloupe, etc". Equally convinced by the universality of American imperialism, *La Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique* declared that "the US is progressively acting like the other nations; it intervenes in the affairs of its neighbors, expands at their expense and radiates beyond its frontiers".
- [25] P 282
- [26] Cette évolution, cette sorte de régression [...], qui rapproche la politique extérieure des Etats-Unis de celle des vieilles sociétés européennes, animées de l'esprit de conquête, n'était pas dans les prévisions des politiques de la première moitié
- [27] "Ce n'est plus un mystère pour personne : les Etats-Unis vont se lancer dans une carrière de politique colonial. L'annexion de Cuba et des Philippines a été un premier pas dans cette voie.
- [28] "Les Etats-Unis, qui paraissaient enfermés entre l'Atlantique et le Pacifique, [...] se mettent à déborder sur les deux océans et plantent leur drapeau sur les îles ou les archipels les plus considérables et les plus distant.
- [29] "[...] la jeune Amérique affiche des ambitions chaque jour grandissantes. L'axiome fameux de Monroe: "l'Amérique aux Américains" est déjà une vieilleries dans ses prétentions; désormais, c'est l'Angleterre, c'est l'Europe, c'est le monde qui réclame sa gloutonnerie.