

Appropriating U.S.-Centrism for Itself

By Arnold August, March 2012

George Washington, the leader of the U.S. War of Independence and later the first president of the U.S., wrote as early as March 1783 (*before* the end of hostilities with England and the September 3, 1783, Treaty of Paris resulting in peace) that the U.S. was a “rising empire.”¹

As part of this expansion project, Cuba was included and, indeed, high on the list. On June 23, 1783, also *before* the formal ending of the war with England, John Adams, who later became the second president of the United States,

articulated the U.S. attitude toward Cuba that would endure until the end of the nineteenth century. Depicting Cuba as a natural extension of the North American continent, he argued that the continuation of the United States required annexing Cuba. He calculated that Cuba should remain under Spanish rule until the United States could directly seize it and that Cuba would never be independent.²

In 1786, George Washington, during the period when procedures for a Constitution were just beginning to be elaborated by him and others, wrote:

However unimportant America may be considered at present,... there will assuredly come a day when this country will have some weight in the scale of Empires.... As the member of an infant empire ... I cannot help turning my attention sometimes to this subject.³

The third president of the U.S., Thomas Jefferson (one of the Founding Fathers of the Constitution), stressed a key desire in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1801. He highlighted the importance of “possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendents to the thousandth and thousandth generation.”⁴ Two years later, Jefferson translated the above words into reality by approximately doubling the size of the original Thirteen Colonies with the Louisiana Purchase from France. From Louisiana, Jefferson looked further south, by sending one of his generals to Cuba to find out whether the Spanish were ready to

cede Cuba to the U.S., a proposition rejected by Spain. In 1809, as former president, Jefferson wrote to his successor, President James Madison, “I candidly confess that I have [for] ever looked upon Cuba as the most interesting addition that can be made to our system of States.” With Cuba and Canada, he says, “We should have such an empire for liberty as she has never surveyed since the creation.” In 1810, Madison let it be known to Great Britain that the U.S. would not tolerate any attempt by Britain to gain possession of Cuba.⁵

In 1819, the U.S. took possession of East Florida, closing in yet further on Cuba. On April 28, 1823, U.S. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams (the son of former president John Adams) wrote to his minister responsible for Spain, Hugh Nelson, enunciating his now famous “ripe fruit” theory:

There are laws of political as well as of physical gravitation; and if an apple severed by the tempest from its native tree cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjointed from its own unnatural connections with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which by the same law of nature cannot cast off from its bosom.⁶

However, often overlooked is Adams’ preamble to this “ripe fruit” motto in the same letter in which he highlights the strategic importance of Cuba and explains much about the current U.S. policy toward Cuba underlined by “democracy promotion” and other pretexts:

These islands [Cuba and Puerto Rico], from their natural local position, are natural appendages of the North American continent; and one of them, Cuba, almost in sight of our shores, from a multitude of considerations has become the object of transcendent importance to the political and commercial interests of the Union. Its commanding position with reference to the Gulf of Mexico and the West Indies,... its safe and capacious harbor,... the nature of its productions and wants.... It is scarcely possible to resist the conviction that the annexation of Cuba to our federal Republic will be indispensable to the continuity and integrity of the Union itself.⁷

The American Dream of an Empire translated itself into repetitive military interventions virtually all over the world. According to the U.S. Congress House Committee on Foreign Relations, between 1798 (only 15 years after the establishment of the Constitution) and World War II, the U.S. carried out 166 military interventions (excluding World War II). In the first decades until 1846–48 (the U.S. war to annex Mexico), most of the military interventions took place as part of the forceful acquisition of other territories into what is the present-day U.S. (a period in which even more Indigenous peoples were massacred). Most of the military interventions were against countries in the South, just a few examples being Mexico: 10 times; Cuba: 8 (1822, 1823, 1824, 1825, 1906–09, 1912, 1917–22, 1933); Honduras: 7; Haiti: 4.⁸

Let us take some other examples since the earliest statements of the Founding Fathers with regard to Latin America and Cuba. The context was the 1810s and 1820s, when countries in Latin America were freeing themselves from Spain and Portugal. On December 2, 1823, U.S. President John Monroe, during his State of the Union Address, makes a barely veiled threat to Europe, especially Spain, to stay away from Latin America, which the U.S. stakes out as its own exclusive territory (known as the Monroe Doctrine):

The American continents [North and South America], by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.... 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.... We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.... But with the Governments [in Latin America] who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.⁹

-
- ¹ Van Alstyne, Richard W. 1960. *The Rising American Empire: A Provocative Analysis of the Origins of the United States as a Nation State*. NY: Norton and Company, p. 1.
- ² Carlisle, Rodney P., and Geoffrey Golson (eds.). 2007. *Manifest Destiny and the Expansion of America*. Santa Barbara: ABL-CLIO, p. 53.
- ³ Van Alstyne, op. cit., p. 69.
- ⁴ Jefferson, Thomas. 1975. "First Inaugural Address." In Merrill D. Peterson (ed.), *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*. NY: Penguin Books, p. 292.
- ⁵ Franklin, Jane. 1997. *Cuba and the United States: A Chronological History*. Melbourne: Ocean Press, p. 2–3.
- ⁶ Adams, John Quincy to Hugh Nelson. 1823. "U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, House Doc. No. 121, Ser. 648." (April 28), p. 7.
- ⁷ Adams, John Quincy to Hugh Nelson, op. cit., p. 6.
- ⁸ U.S. Congress. 1975. "House Committee on Foreign Relations. Background Information of the Use of Force of U.S. Armed Forces in Foreign Countries, 1975 Revision." Committee Print, 94th Congress, 1st Session.
- ⁹ Monroe, John. 1823. "State of the Union Address." U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (December 2). At <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=23&page=transcript>.