In constructing United States foreign policy in the past century, American politicians have been particularly careful that what the Founding Fathers formulated as “liberty at home”, a principle so much exploited throughout American history that is nowadays often taken for granted, remains protected. Designed to keep a young country alert to the dangers of European colonial empires and domestic political battles, the doctrine has a very different significance for a 21st century Super Power. At least the means which American diplomacy employs to preserve that so important, and so much threatened, internal liberty have drastically changed, giving rise to a new-generation foreign policy.

However, contemporary foreign policy is not entirely new, since it has its roots in 18th and 19th century political ideology. As Walter McDougall suggests in the book “Promised Land, Crusader State”, there exist certain doctrines of the past that transcend their time, and become grounding principles of present day American political reality. McDougall divides US diplomatic history into two major periods, and utilizes religious terminology to name them “Old Testament” and “New Testament” eras. In a way, he implies that the whole American political tradition can be traced back to the Puritan concept of a tight-knit community with strong moral values that has been blessed by God to create a second Jerusalem in the New World. In fact, in McDougall’s view, American political history started from John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill”. Hence can be explained
the determination of the young 19th century American nation to establish at all costs a
more perfect society, and to do it in its own way.

However, the still fragile American country needed to acquire true independence
and to ensure its security on a continent split among the Old World imperial powers. If
American values were to survive, a flexible diplomatic strategy was needed. Thus, out of
necessity, the principles of Unilateralism and the Monroe Doctrine came to life. As
McDougall points out, none of them had anything to do with isolationalism, or an
“ostrich-like policy toward foreign countries” (McDougall, p.40). The early generation of
American politicians had a clear view of the young republic’s military weakness. The
United States was doomed to play a marginal role as a side in a conflict that involved
great military and naval powers, such as England and France. Therefore, it was in
America’s national interest, as Hamilton and Jefferson formulated it, to “avoid
permanent, entangling alliances” (McDougall, p.40), and to secure, in England’s fashion,
the balance of power on an American continent, dotted with foreign colonies.

The fourth doctrine of the “Old Testament”, Expansionism, did not represent
simply an urge of a rapidly growing nation, faced with the necessity of acquiring land for
new settlement. Manifest Destiny served two other important purposes. On the one hand,
it was a logical continuation of the Monroe Doctrine which demonstrated American
determination to defend its interests in the Western Hemisphere. But if the European
colonial powers were to be forced out of the North American continent and kept away
from it, America would have to fill in the resulting vacuum and settle the enormous
expanses of free land. Most importantly, for the first time since its independence, the
young American nation possessed an ideology to justify its ambitions for dominance, for the time being only in the Western Hemisphere, but later in the whole world as well.

That ideology had its religious predecessor in the Puritan view of a progressive American society that was endowed with a mission to perfect mankind by teaching it American ideals. For the first time, though, the concept of spreading American values, or, expressed with the words of the alleged creator of the Manifest Destiny doctrine, John O’Sullivan, the predestination of the American nation to “manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True” (qtd. in McDougall p.77).

Taking in consideration the doctrine of Expansionism, the actual dividing line between the Old and New Testament period, or between post-independence and 20th century American political thinking, can be drawn long before William McKinley came to office and for the first time sent American troops to fight outside the Western Hemisphere for what critics claimed to be an idealistic cause.

It is a fact, though, that the pursuit of territorial expansion was a primary goal even of the Founding Fathers who considered it equivalent to independence and vital for the survival of the new nation on a continent, split among England, France, and Spain. Despite apprehensions on the part of some of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention that too big a territory cannot be governed under a flexible constitution, granting too many rights to the individual states, landed and commercial, expansion represented a key element in the policy if all 19th century American presidents.

Later, when in 1898 the United States became a colonial power, the question of the consistency of American imperialism with the overall American political ideology
was posed. Some Americans wondered whether the strife for colonial conquest was simply a “great aberration” (McDougall, p.102) from the traditional American policy of liberty at home and non-intervention abroad when the national interests were not at stake. In the book “Promised Land, Crusader State” Walter McDougall presents two conflicting theories about the character of American colonial expansion. As some historians suggest, “US imperialism was a spasmodic reaction to fundamental changes in American society, in the geopolitical environment, or both” (McDougall, p.102). On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a phenomenon “true to American traditions” (p.102) and that it actually “represent[s] a mission, a duty, a noble destiny” (p.102).

It is no denying that the industrial revolution, the implementation of technology in all spheres of life, and the growth of corporate business turned America into a world industrial power which, after the end of the great depression in 1897, was in need of foreign markets. American society changed as well. With Progressivism preaching social reforms at home, many Americans came to believe that changing the entire world for the better by teaching it American values was not just a feasible, but a very desirable goal. Besides, with the United States spreading over the whole North American continent, the frontier, which was so much needed in times of trouble, was not available any more. Yet, it still existed as an ideal in American mentality.

As Walter McDougall mentions, the frontier of expansion was never set on the Pacific coast. James Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State, back in the 1860s preached for continuation of American expansion into the Caribbean and especially in the Pacific Ocean region. For years, American diplomacy had pursued an “open-door” policy in China. At the end of the 19th century, however, the door in China was about to be shut,
with Russia, Japan, and Germany fighting for their own spheres of influence in the region and threatening to oust the United States of the huge Chinese market. It is quite obvious that in the above-mentioned circumstances, with American vital overseas interests at stake, expansion in the Pacific region seemed to be both economically and morally justified.

Therefore, it is very doubtful that the United States was led by “militant righteousness” (McDougall, p.118) when it decided to wage its first colonial war against Spain. It was simply a carefully calculated interest, hidden behind noble Progressivism, which urged William McKinley to resort to military power to fight allegedly for Cuban independence while in reality defending American commercial interests in the Far East. No one at the time and after accused President McKinley of conducting bad policy.

Walter McDougall also seems to favor what years later became known as “power politics”. In fact, he considers it consistent with American political tradition, as it successfully promotes all his “Old Testament” doctrines. The politics of using force, or at least demonstrating readiness to do so if American interests have been threatened, is derived from the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 which was designed to protect the first two American traditions- Exceptionalism (or liberty at home) and Unilateralism (or the freedom of independent foreign policy). Later, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “four policemen”, or ruling the entire post-war world by force, came as a much more power-oriented elaboration on Teddy Roosevelt’s Corollary for establishing order where it was necessary.

The policy of Containment, which was, in McDougall’s view, by far the most successful American foreign policy doctrine, was born as a result of the utmost fear of a
communist threat against all that America was and wanted to be—a beacon of democracy in the world. And whether Global Meliorism was successful or not, it represented the ultimate attempt of the United States to pay for democracy in the Third World, to prevent the “domino-effect” theory from becoming a reality by stabilizing and democratizing Germany and Japan, and to stop the communist encroachment on a post-war Western Europe.

And finally, no matter how controversial Wilson’s Liberal Internationalism is considered to be, maybe it was the best way to promote American ideals of liberty and democracy, a part of the Manifest Destiny doctrine as well, throughout the whole world. Considered by Walter McDougall too idealistic and even naïve, Woodrow Wilson established the path for United States’ real involvement in world affairs.