Introduction

With the theoretical framework in place it is possible to outline how the different facets of social power have enabled the United States government to construct and maintain the Internet in line with its foreign policy aims. This chapter will demonstrate how these aims – the pursuit of an international system comprised of liberal capitalist democracies – have informed the construction and reproduction of the Internet. This will be undertaken by first outlining the nature of the Open Door policy and its central role in American grand strategy, up to and including the Obama administration. The story told here is one of the overall continuity of American foreign practices. While certain changes are apparent both within and between administrations, with the Bush administration being a standout in this regard, these changes take place within coordinates established by the set of cultural values and material interests that comprise the Open Door. Second, we will note how American grand strategy, driven to open markets to foreign capital and to open polities to become liberal democracies, has informed international communications strategy and policies in their political and economic aspects. Third, we will proceed from the discussion of American policy to note how the bias of the Internet meets these goals, acting as a form of institutional power for the United States internationally. The formal political and economic equality of the Internet, expressed in the end-to-end principle, masks the manner in which the technology favours powerful actors in the global political economy. While anyone may create and transmit content, the financial and technical resources of large corporations ensures their dominance of both content and application creation. Considered in these
terms we can see how the Internet reinforces the power of the United States through its institutional rules, which disproportionately benefit the United States in economic and political terms. The analysis of this chapter thereby sets out the object of American foreign policy discourse and practice discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 – the achievement of technological closure surrounding the Internet in order to secure this form of institutional power.

The Open Door tradition

The purpose and aims of American foreign policy engender highly contentious debate. Whether American aims are driven by identity or interests, whether they are prompted by security concerns or the pursuit of avarice, whether US rhetoric matches the reality of practice, all these issues form central axes of conflict among scholars studying US foreign relations. We cannot hope to engage comprehensively with this topic in a sustained and comprehensive manner – the material is simply too vast to cover here, and this discussion will not, therefore, partake of sustained engagements with alternative interpretations of American foreign policy and its drivers. Instead, what is offered is a condensed – but considered – argument that American foreign policy is informed by the aims of the Open Door approach to foreign policy. This policy is generated by the structural pressures of capitalism (horizontal and vertical, as noted in Chapter 3) and by the specifically American response to these pressures – a response informed by a liberal democratic American political culture. US policy in general pursues the twin aims of opening markets to international capital and opening polities to conform to liberal democratic principles.

The argument that American foreign policy is driven by the pursuit of the Open Door finds its classical expression in William Appleman Williams The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (1972 [1959]). In this work, Williams outlined the driving force behind American foreign policy as an extension of Frederick Jackson Turner’s ‘Frontier Thesis’, first expressed in 1893, which contended that the United States pursued continuous expansion across the North American continent – and, in Williams’s further development, across the globe and into Empire (Williams 1980) – in order to meet the needs of domestic political stability. American society, Turner and Williams argue, is based upon the successful expansion of the capitalist economy in the United States. Domestic division and discontent are ameliorated and contained due to a form of class compromise in which the continual expansion of the economy and