

Imperialism and Revolution



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Program #6

The Origins of U.S. Imperialism

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By Charles McKelvey

We are seeking to understand the reasons for the spectacular economic ascent of the United States from 1776 to 1968. So far, we have identified, first, the lucrative trading relation of the English North American colonies and the early republic with the Caribbean slaveholders; and, secondly, the trade between the Northeastern United States and the slave South during the first half of the nineteenth century. These trading relations enabled the accumulation of capital and the industrialization of manufacturing in the Northeastern region of the United States. In addition, the conquest of the indigenous populations and of Mexico during the nineteenth century provided the territorial base for a continued economic and commercial expansion. In observing these dynamics, we are able to see that slavery and conquest provided the foundation for the spectacular U.S. ascent.

In our last program, we saw the important role of an exceptional group of men who came of age in the 1860s. They were exceptional in their capacities to discern possibilities being established by the rapid commercial expansion of the nation, and by their amoral commitment to the pursuit of profit as the highest

value. As they obtained control of the nation, its economy became concentrated, with a few large corporations dominating the market; and its social institutions were transformed to adapt to this new stage of monopoly capitalism.

The greater efficiency of concentrated industry created a problem of overproduction. The productive capacity of the nation exceeded its domestic market and the capacity of its consumers to buy, threatening to break the spectacular U.S. economic ascent. The problem became evident to the captains of industry during the Great Depression of 1892-1893. It was at this historic moment that the captains of industry formulated a new expansionist foreign policy approach, which they called "imperialism." Their basic goal was to find new markets outside the United States for U.S. manufacturing and agricultural products.

Imperialism has been the consistent foundation of U.S. foreign policy from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the present. Imperialist policies first appeared in public discourse in the Republican Party platform of 1896, which challenged the prevailing isolationism of the political culture; the platform advocated an expansion of military expenditures and the establishment of military bases abroad. The Philippines, Hawaii, and Cuba were viewed as strategic locations for U.S. military bases, inasmuch as control of the Caribbean and the Far East were considered central to imperialist intentions.

The first practical implementation of the new expansionist foreign policy was U.S. intervention in Cuba in 1898, which resulted in the U.S. acquisition of the Spanish colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. Seeking to obscure the colonial character of these acquisitions of lands beyond the continental territory of the United States, the U.S. government claimed to be pursuing a civilizing mission, consistent with the values of democracy, liberty, and justice. The discourse of the political elite was effective in convincing the people that the new imperialist policies were defending freedom and were the fulfillment of a "new manifest destiny," in contrast to the decadent European empires.

The Theodore Roosevelt administration (1901 to 1909) intervened in other nations without reserve. Roosevelt sponsored the secession of Panama from Colombia, enabling the construction of the Panama Canal; it intervened militarily in the Dominican Republic, enabling it to control that country's customs policies; it occupied Cuba for the second time; it intervened militarily in the wars between Guatemala and El Salvador and between Honduras and Nicaragua; and it intervened politically in order to provoke the resignation of the President of Nicaragua.

The administration of William Howard Taft (1909 to 1913) adopted "dollar diplomacy," which involved bribing the politicians of Latin America nations. But military interventions continued, in Honduras and Nicaragua. In addition, the Taft administration made threats designed to curtail the development of the Mexican Revolution.

Woodrow Wilson criticized "dollar diplomacy" due to its ethical implications. But he expressed a similar view when he asserted that dollars "ought to be reserved for the ministers of the state, even if the sovereignty of the reluctant nation is mistreated in the process." In addition, military interventions continued. Between 1913 and 1921, under the pretext of "promoting democracy" and "stopping German intervention," the U.S. government interfered in Mexican international affairs; it occupied Haiti, an occupation that continued from 1915 to 1934; it occupied Dominican Republic, which lasted from 1916 to 24; it intervened in Panama in 1918; and it supported coups d'état and dictatorships in Central and South America.

Wilson, however, developed a more advanced ideological formulation of imperialism. He sought to establish a new international order on a foundation of U.S. political values, thus facilitating greater global acceptance of U.S. economic penetration and reducing the need for military intervention.

However, the United States had not yet attained sufficient economic, military, and political power to impose a U.S. international order under its direction. Wilson encountered opposition from Britain and France, who objected to a reduction of their spheres of influence. At the same time, Wilson's vision

encountered opposition within the United States. U.S. capitalism and political culture had not yet developed sufficiently, and important sectors of the capitalist class were not convinced that the “new world order” proposed by Wilson would provide sufficient guarantees for the protection of their interests in other lands.

From 1921 to 1933, the presidential administrations of Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover continued U.S. imperialist policies toward Latin America, supporting military dictatorships in order to constrain anti-imperialist popular struggles, and initiating new interventions in Panama, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

We see, therefore, the continuous development of an imperialist foreign policy from 1898 to 1933, regardless of shifts in rhetoric or changes in political party. U.S. military interventions, political interference, and economic penetration were designed to attain access to markets, raw materials, and labor, even though they were presented to the people with a democratic face. They were effective in enabling the acceleration of the economic ascent of the nation.

Next time, we will look at the evolution of a softer form of imperialism, from FDR to Jimmy Carter.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a world more just, democratic, and sustainable.

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