

Imperialism and Revolution



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Program #7

Soft imperialism: From Roosevelt to Nixon

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In our last program, we saw that the spectacular U.S. economic ascent was aided during the period of 1898 to 1933 by imperialist policies, involving military interventions and political interference in order to provide the United States access to the markets, raw materials, and cheap labor of Latin America and the Caribbean. Imperialist policies were continuous, going beyond changes in rhetoric and political parties.

In the period from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Richard Nixon, imperialism took a softer form, but it was still imperialism, seeking access to the markets, raw materials, and labor of Latin America and the Caribbean.

In response to anti-imperialist popular movements in Latin America and the Caribbean, and to isolationist tendencies in the USA, the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt turned to the “Good Neighbor” policy, which pursued U.S. imperialist goals through means other than direct military intervention. The strategy was to strengthen the military forces of Latin American nations, so that they could play a more active role

in maintaining social control. In some cases, this involved supporting military dictatorships that had been established through previous military interventions of the period 1898-1926. In others cases, it involved establishing military dictatorships through diplomatic maneuvering and economic pressure, without military intervention. In still other cases, U.S. objectives were attained with the pressuring of constitutional governments in power. In addition, as a necessary concession to the difficult political situation of the national political elite, who stood between the requirements of imperialism and popular anti-imperialist movements, greater latitude of action was given to Latin American and the Caribbean national elites, reducing to some degree their subordination to U.S. interests. This concession gave to national political elites and their upper-class supporters a stronger commitment to the neocolonial world-system as well as a greater capacity to maintain social order in their nations.

These new policies represented the pursuit of an imperialist agenda through alternative means. The Good Neighbor policy did not abandon imperialist goals; rather, it adapted imperialist policies to new economic, ideological, and political conditions.

As World War II was moving toward an allied victory, Roosevelt envisioned a reconversion to a post-war peacetime economy. But Roosevelt died before the war ended, and the implementation his vision was complicated by high levels of unemployment and difficulties in the reinsertion of soldiers in the post-war economy, and by the central role of war industries in the U.S. economy.

Thus, there emerged an alternative idea that proposed the expansion of the war industry rather than its reconversion for peace. The Cold War ideology falsely presented the foreign policy of the Soviet Union as expansionist, thus creating a climate of fear and insecurity in order to justify the militarization of U.S. economy and society. In addition, the Cold War ideology falsely presented as communist those Latin American and Caribbean governments and movements that sought the sovereignty of their nations, downplaying their essentially nationalist and anti-imperialist character. Armed with the ideological weapon of the Cold War, from 1945 to 1960, the imperialist maneuvers of the administrations of Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower brought about the fall of progressive governments in Guatemala, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Haiti, which were followed by military dictatorships that were sustained through U.S. support.

John F. Kennedy became President of the United States at a time when the process of the decolonization of the European colonies in Asia and Africa was well underway. Although decolonization established new possibilities for economic penetration by the United States, the situation was viewed as threatening by the Kennedy Administration, which considered newly independent Third World nations to be vulnerable to communist influence. Accordingly, the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration gave greater emphasis to the Third World as the arena of the Cold War conflict, developing a perspective that disregarded the nationalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist nature of revolutionary Third World governments and social movements.

The Kennedy strategy toward the Third World included the development of a U.S. capacity for counterinsurgency, involving armed confrontation with the revolutionary movements of the Third World. The Special Forces ("Green Berets") were developed in order to give the armed forces the capacity for a flexible response in any place or circumstance in the world. In addition, the CIA became involved in training military and para-military groups and the security personnel of Third World nations in the techniques of death squads, torture, assassination, and terrorism. Believing that the United States and its allies were confronted with a supposed "international communist conspiracy," the Kennedy administration excused any excess, including the most brutal forms of behavior. It was the dark side of Camelot.

From the period of 1964 to 1976, the United States continued, with respect to Latin America, with the concept of a softer form of imperialism that had been in place since FDR. It sought to influence without direct military interventions, although it was compelled by political events to send troops to Panama in 1964 and the Dominican Republic in 1965. But in general, the administrations of Lyndon Johnson,

Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford found less direct forms of interference, providing strategic and political support to successful coups d'état in Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. And they provided economic and military assistance to governments that were participating in the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in opposition to anti-imperialist popular movements in Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, and Uruguay.

When I was a secondary school student in the United States in the early 1960s, I observed on television Latin American protests with signs, "Down with Yankee imperialism!" I thought that the protestors merely were expressing anger or hostility toward our nation, somewhat akin to calling someone a brute or a thug. Years later, reading books that described the history of the relation between the United States and Latin America, I became aware that imperialism was and is a deliberate set of strategies that intend to attain access to markets, labor, and raw materials; and that imperialist policies in relation to Latin America have been continuous since the closing decade of the nineteenth century. Moreover, inasmuch as imperialist economic objectives were in essence attained, they contributed to the acceleration of the U.S. ascent during the period.

Imperialism is creative, constantly looking for new ways to politically penetrate in defense of economic interests, adjusting to the constant resistance efforts by the peoples that suffer from imperialism. History teaches us that these dynamics are constantly present: Imperialism is imperialism, in one form or another; and the peoples resist, driven by a faith that social justice will be attained.

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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