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Empire or Humanity?

What the Classroom Didn't Teach Me About the
American Empire

Howard Zinn

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”to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit, and by such means as we see fit.”

We can hardly ask for a more candid, blunter declaration of imperial design. It has been echoed in recent years by the intellectual handmaidens of the Bush administration, but with assurances that the motive of this ”influence” is benign, that the ”purposes” – whether in Luce’s formulation or more recent ones – are noble, that this is an ”imperialism lite.” As George Bush said in his second inaugural address: ”Spreading liberty around the world... is the calling of our time.” The *New York Times* called that speech ”striking for its idealism.”

The American Empire has always been a bipartisan project – Democrats and Republicans have taken turns extending it, extolling it, justifying it. President Woodrow Wilson told graduates of the Naval Academy in 1914 (the year he bombarded Mexico) that the U.S. used ”her navy and her army... as the instruments of civilization, not as the instruments of aggression.” And Bill Clinton, in 1992, told West Point graduates: ”The values you learned here... will be able to spread throughout the country and throughout the world.”

For the people of the United States, and indeed for people all over the world, those claims sooner or later are revealed to be false. The rhetoric, often persuasive on first hearing, soon becomes overwhelmed by horrors that can no longer be concealed: the bloody corpses of Iraq, the torn limbs of American GIs, the millions of families driven from their homes – in the Middle East and in the Mississippi Delta.

Have not the justifications for empire, embedded in our culture, assaulting our good sense – that war is necessary for security, that expansion is fundamental to civilization – begun to lose their hold on our minds? Have we reached a point in history where we are ready to embrace a new way of living in the world, expanding not our military power, but our humanity?

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Justifying Empire

The ruthless attacks of September 11th (as the official 9/11 Commission acknowledged) derived from fierce hatred of U.S. expansion in the Middle East and elsewhere. Even before that event, the Defense Department acknowledged, according to Chalmers Johnson's book *The Sorrows of Empire*, the existence of more than 700 American military bases outside of the United States.

Since that date, with the initiation of a "war on terrorism," many more bases have been established or expanded: in Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, the desert of Qatar, the Gulf of Oman, the Horn of Africa, and wherever else a compliant nation could be bribed or coerced.

When I was bombing cities in Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and France in the Second World War, the moral justification was so simple and clear as to be beyond discussion: We were saving the world from the evil of fascism. I was therefore startled to hear from a gunner on another crew – what we had in common was that we both read books – that he considered this "an imperialist war." Both sides, he said, were motivated by ambitions of control and conquest. We argued without resolving the issue. Ironically, tragically, not long after our discussion, this fellow was shot down and killed on a mission.

In wars, there is always a difference between the motives of the soldiers and the motives of the political leaders who send them into battle. My motive, like that of so many, was innocent of imperial ambition. It was to help defeat fascism and create a more decent world, free of aggression, militarism, and racism.

The motive of the U.S. establishment, understood by the aerial gunner I knew, was of a different nature. It was described early in 1941 by Henry Luce, multi-millionaire owner of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazines, as the coming of "The American Century." The time had arrived, he said, for the United States

to have a firm foothold on the continent of Asia, especially now that the Communists were in power in China.

Years later, as the covert intervention in Vietnam grew into a massive and brutal military operation, the imperial designs of the United States became yet clearer to me. In 1967, I wrote a little book called *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*. By that time I was heavily involved in the movement against the war.

When I read the hundreds of pages of the Pentagon Papers entrusted to me by Daniel Ellsberg, what jumped out at me were the secret memos from the National Security Council. Explaining the U.S. interest in Southeast Asia, they spoke bluntly of the country's motives as a quest for "tin, rubber, oil."

Neither the desertions of soldiers in the Mexican War, nor the draft riots of the Civil War, nor the anti-imperialist groups at the turn of the century, nor the strong opposition to World War I – indeed no antiwar movement in the history of the nation reached the scale of the opposition to the war in Vietnam. At least part of that opposition rested on an understanding that more than Vietnam was at stake, that the brutal war in that tiny country was part of a grander imperial design.

Various interventions following the U.S. defeat in Vietnam seemed to reflect the desperate need of the still-reigning superpower – even after the fall of its powerful rival, the Soviet Union – to establish its dominance everywhere. Hence the invasion of Grenada in 1982, the bombing assault on Panama in 1989, the first Gulf war of 1991. Was George Bush Sr. heartsick over Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait, or was he using that event as an opportunity to move U.S. power firmly into the coveted oil region of the Middle East? Given the history of the United States, given its obsession with Middle Eastern oil dating from Franklin Roosevelt's 1945 deal with King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, and the CIA's overthrow of the democratic Mossadeq government in Iran in 1953, it is not hard to decide that question.

With an occupying army waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan, with military bases and corporate bullying in every part of the world, there is hardly a question any more of the existence of an American Empire. Indeed, the once fervent denials have turned into a boastful, unashamed embrace of the idea.

However, the very idea that the United States was an empire did not occur to me until after I finished my work as a bombardier with the Eighth Air Force in the Second World War, and came home. Even as I began to have second thoughts about the purity of the "Good War," even after being horrified by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even after rethinking my own bombing of towns in Europe, I still did not put all that together in the context of an American "Empire." I was conscious, like everyone, of the British Empire and the other imperial powers of Europe, but the United States was not seen in the same way. When, after the war, I went to college under the G.I. Bill of Rights and took courses in U.S. history, I usually found a chapter in the history texts called "The Age of Imperialism." It invariably referred to the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the conquest of the Philippines that followed. It seemed that American imperialism lasted only a relatively few years. There was no overarching view of U.S. expansion that might lead to the idea of a more far-ranging empire – or period of "imperialism."

I recall the classroom map (labeled "Western Expansion") which presented the march across the continent as a natural, almost biological phenomenon. That huge acquisition of land called "The Louisiana Purchase" hinted at nothing but vacant land acquired. There was no sense that this territory had been occupied by hundreds of Indian tribes which would have to be annihilated or forced from their homes – what we now call "ethnic cleansing" – so that whites could settle the land, and later railroads could crisscross it, presaging "civilization" and its brutal discontents.

Neither the discussions of "Jacksonian democracy" in history courses, nor the popular book by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson*, told me about the "Trail of Tears," the deadly forced march of "the five civilized tribes" westward from Georgia and Alabama across the Mississippi, leaving 4,000 dead in their wake. No treatment of the Civil War mentioned the Sand Creek massacre of hundreds of Indian villagers in Colorado just as "emancipation" was proclaimed for black people by Lincoln's administration.

That classroom map also had a section to the south and west labeled "Mexican Cession." This was a handy euphemism for the aggressive war against Mexico in 1846 in which the United States seized half of that country's land, giving us California and the great Southwest. The term "Manifest Destiny," used at that time, soon of course became more universal. On the eve of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the *Washington Post* saw beyond Cuba: "We are face to face with a strange destiny. The taste of Empire is in the mouth of the people even as the taste of blood in the jungle."

The violent march across the continent, and even the invasion of Cuba, appeared to be within a natural sphere of U.S. interest. After all, hadn't the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 declared the Western Hemisphere to be under our protection? But with hardly a pause after Cuba came the invasion of the Philippines, halfway around the world. The word "imperialism" now seemed a fitting one for U.S. actions. Indeed, that long, cruel war – treated quickly and superficially in the history books – gave rise to an Anti-Imperialist League, in which William James and Mark Twain were leading figures. But this was not something I learned in university either.

The "Sole Superpower" Comes into View

Reading outside the classroom, however, I began to fit the pieces of history into a larger mosaic. What at first had seemed like a purely passive foreign policy in the decade leading up to the First World War now appeared as a succession of violent interventions: the seizure of the Panama Canal zone from Colombia, a naval bombardment of the Mexican coast, the dispatch of the Marines to almost every country in Central America, occupying armies sent to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. As the much-decorated General Smedley Butler, who participated in many of those interventions, wrote later: "I was an errand boy for Wall Street."

At the very time I was learning this history – the years after World War II – the United States was becoming not just another imperial power, but the world's leading superpower. Determined to maintain and expand its monopoly on nuclear weapons, it was taking over remote islands in the Pacific, forcing the inhabitants to leave, and turning the islands into deadly playgrounds for more atomic tests.

In his memoir, *No Place to Hide*, Dr. David Bradley, who monitored radiation in those tests, described what was left behind as the testing teams went home: "[R]adioactivity, contamination, the wrecked island of Bikini and its sad-eyed patient exiles." The tests in the Pacific were followed, over the years, by more tests in the deserts of Utah and Nevada, more than a thousand tests in all.

When the war in Korea began in 1950, I was still studying history as a graduate student at Columbia University. Nothing in my classes prepared me to understand American policy in Asia. But I was reading *I. F. Stone's Weekly*. Stone was among the very few journalists who questioned the official justification for sending an army to Korea. It seemed clear to me then that it was not the invasion of South Korea by the North that prompted U.S. intervention, but the desire of the United States