

## WARS, ELECTIONS, AND THE ECONOMY: EMPIRE AT THE CROSS ROADS

SAN DIEGO CITY COLLEGE, OCTOBER 11, 2008

PLENARY 1-12:30-2PM, ROOM A-213

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "War, Empire and Everyday Life"

I've been asked to speak on the topic of "War, Empire and Everyday Life." I'll start with everyday life. I'm happy to be here today, honored to be invited, but more than anything I'm grateful to have escaped San Francisco where the U.S. Navy's elite fighter pilots, the Blue Angels, have been terrorizing small animals and birds, children and people in general for the past 2 days practicing for their performances all day today and Sunday, along with other military air shows and fleets in the Bay. All to honor the medieval mercenary and killer, Christopher Columbus. And that's in the most liberal sub-region of the country!

The militaristic accoutrements are fitting for commemorating the onset of European brutal conquest and colonialism, genocide of the indigenous peoples, and African slavery, because it took force of arms and rivers of blood to carry out that mission.

FDR and Congress declared Columbus Day a national holiday only in 1934, at the height of the Great Depression. It was created precisely to connect the U.S. with the onset of European colonialism and imperialism for the purpose of instilling patriotic pride in the disheartened population. It didn't work, but total immersion in war a few years later did the job. World War II would exponentially affect the obscene size of the U.S. military, the largest in human history, and, of course, including genocidal atomic weaponry.

Every 20 years since the Great Depression, the financial system has collapsed, and in each case, as with the New Deal, a massive transfer of wealth and property to the owning class took place. And once again, that's the case. Challenging celebrating Columbus might be a good

way to dismantling the fake patriotism and fake origin myth engendered by the corrupt U.S. system.

I complain about being buzzed by the Blue Angels five days a year, but, of course, I am aware that here in San Diego you put up with virtual militarism 24/7. And in Iraq and Afghanistan, they not only buzz, but also drop bombs.

I'm a historian, so I want to talk about the origins of the US empire and its endless wars of aggression.

*We were like Custer. We were surrounded.* —Sgt. James J. Riley explaining why he ordered surrender in an engagement in Nasiriyah, Iraq on March 23, 2003.<sup>1</sup>

At the onset of the U.S. military invasion of Iraq, Senator Robert Byrd emotionally queried: “What is happening to this country? When did we become a nation that ignores and berates our friends? When did we decide to risk undermining international order by adopting a radical and doctrinaire approach to using our awesome military might? How can we abandon diplomacy when the turmoil in the world cries out for diplomacy?”

As a historian, I would have to respond to Senator Byrd that he has believed in a fairy tale. The U.S. empire was born in 1776 or thereabouts. Many admirable U.S. anti-imperialists make the same point as Senator Byrd. An erasure of history is at the heart of some of the most anti-imperialist critiques of the Bush administration's foreign policy. Continuity is hidden, and a small departure is exaggerated. From Gore Vidal to Manning Marable to Michael Moore “lost democracy” is a refrain. The late Edward Said wrote in 2003: “The doctrine of military pre-emption was never voted on by the American people or their representatives... It seems so monumentally criminal that important words like democracy and freedom have been hijacked,

used as a mask for pillage, taking over territory and settling scores.” Said ends his essay by, stating: “Bush looks like a cowboy.”<sup>2</sup>

That observation is also common to critics of the Bush administration around the world. Although it is meant to be understood as a *bad* thing, in fact, the cowboy is not a negative metaphor for many U.S. citizens, particularly those who are descendants of the old settler class, as are the majority of the ruling class and officers of the military. Perhaps the fact that I grew up as a child of a cowboy father and Indian mother narrows my view of this metaphor, making it loom too large and out of perspective. Then again, maybe that experience brings with it some insider knowledge.

In order to understand the United States at the present stage of its long existence as a continuous state, we must come to grips with white supremacy, the U.S. origin myth, and the origins of the U.S. as an imperialist state and a colonizing power, that is, a settler state, and by these means created an almost pure capitalist state, with the state having no function beyond the arbiter in the accumulation of capital and protection of the owning class.

Two paragraphs, rarely cited, from the *Declaration of Independence* raise thorny questions about Anglo-American imperialist roots in forming the breakaway United States of America. This was not simply the founding of a republic for propertied, mostly slave-owning, white males, but more importantly a settler-colonialist and imperialist-aggressor state.

"He [King George] has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose, obstructing the laws for naturalization of foreigners, refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new appropriations of lands. [The 1764 British Proclamation made British settlement over the Allegheny/Appalachian line into Indian country illegal and ordered the return of those tens of thousand settlers who had already squatted there, demanding land rights.]

"He [King George] has excited domestic insurrections amongst us and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions."

Not only did founding father Thomas Jefferson pen those words, he was also the real architect of the genocide and confiscation of the land of settled indigenous peoples later termed the Jacksonian policy of Indian removal, as well as the Monroe Doctrine that mandated U.S. control of Latin America and the Caribbean, what I call horizontal and vertical imperialism, from the founding of the U.S.

Reconciling empire and liberty was a historic obsession of U.S. political thinkers and historians, in the twenty-first century openly being debated once again. Thomas Jefferson had hailed the United States as an "empire for liberty." Andrew Jackson coined the phrase, "extending the area of freedom" to describe the process in which slavery had been introduced into Texas in violation of governing Mexican laws, to be quickly followed by a slaveholder's rebellion and U.S. annexation. The term "freedom" became a euphemism for the continental and worldwide expansion of the world's leading slave power. The contradictions, particularly since the initial rationalization for U.S. independence was anti-empire, are multiple.

It is easy to date U.S. imperialism to Andrew Jackson, but he only carried out the original plan, initially as an army general who led three genocidal wars against the Muskogee in Georgia/Florida, then as the most popular president ever, and the organizer of the expulsion of all native peoples east of the Mississippi to the Oklahoma Territory.

Although white supremacy was the working rationalization and ideology of English theft of Native American lands, and especially the justification for African slavery, the independence bid by what became the United States of America is more problematic, in that democracy/equality and supremacy/dominance/empire do not make an easy fit. It was during the 1820s, the era of Jacksonian Democracy, that the unique U.S. origin myth was created, James

Fennimore Cooper the initial scribe. James Fennimore Cooper's re-invention of America in *The Last of the Mohicans* has become the official U.S. origin story. Herman Melville called Cooper "our national novelist," and, of course, he was the great hero of Walt Whitman who sang the song of manhood and the American super-race through empire. As an enthusiastic supporter of the U.S. war against Mexico, 1846–1848, Whitman proposed the stationing of sixty thousand U.S. troops in Mexico in order to establish a regime change there, stating, "whose efficiency and permanency shall be guaranteed by the United States. This will bring out enterprise, open the way for manufacturers and commerce, into which the immense dead capital of the country will find its way."<sup>11</sup>

Whitman's sentiment (and he was the most beloved writer of his time, and still beloved by contemporary U.S. poets, particularly the Beats) followed the already established U.S. origin myth that had the frontier settlers replacing the native peoples, similar to the parallel Afrikaner origin myth in South Africa.

To the extent that African Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and non-European immigrants are allowed (and are willing) to embrace and embody U.S. supremacy, they may be accepted as *conversos*, as the Spanish Inquisition termed those who professed Christianity despite their "unclean" blood. Yet in the end, only the Old Settlers are true Americans.

This white supremacist ideology formed the core of U.S. foreign policy as well, from its origins to the present. As Samir Amin pointed out: "During this entire phase [the Cold War] the East-West conflict was presented as a struggle between socialism and capitalism, although it was never anything other than the conflict between the periphery and the center, manifested in its most radical form."<sup>12</sup>

Why so we date U.S. imperialism only to 1898, and as an aberration? “American” supremacy and populist imperialism are inseparable from the content of the U.S. origin story and the definition of patriotism in the United States today. And it began at the beginning, even before the founding of the United States, not as an accident or aberration in the progression of democracy. The founding of the United States marked a split in the British Empire, not an anticolonial liberation movement.

The very term, “frontier,” used to define the border between independent Native American nations and the United States, implies a foreign country on the other side of a demarcation line—a country to be invaded, its inhabitants controlled and then expelled, while settlers move in protected by the army. Everything accounted for in the first hundred years plus, as “movement of the frontier” was plain and simple imperialism, fitting all the definitions thereof.

During this new phase of U.S. imperialism following 9/11, accelerating with the invasion, occupation, and administration of Iraq, commentators and historians—left and right—but mostly liberal Democrats, observe that the United States is not very good at imperialism, with vague references to the Spanish-American War. Actually, the United States has not become the most powerful military machine and dominant power on earth and in history by accident or by staying home and minding the cows and banks like the Swiss, who are capitalist and rich, but not imperialists.

“Well, so what?” many of my antiwar and social-justice friends ask me, asserting that the truth would alienate “ordinary people,” whoever they are. Who would know since it has never been tried? Besides, I have my doubts that most of my leftist friends are themselves prepared to accept that the very origin of the United States is fundamentally imperialist, rather than imperialism being a divergence from a well-intentioned path. The public acceptance of media

propaganda justifying U.S. government aggression falls into the pattern of a belief system based on the origin story that is uninterrupted and uninterrogated by us, the left.

The expansion of the United States from sea to shining sea is coming under reexamination, even from bourgeois historians, with the sudden unabashed assertion of U.S. imperialism. Warren Zimmermann, in his 2002 book on the frankly imperial aims of the Teddy Roosevelt administration, *First Great Triumph* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2002), introduces his material with words rarely found in mainstream literature: "Americans like to pretend that they have no imperial past. Yet they have shown expansionist tendencies since colonial days...Overland expansion, often at the expense of Mexicans and Indians, was a marked feature of American history right through the period of the Civil War, by which time the United States had reached its continental proportions. The War for American Independence, which created most of the founding myths of the Republic, was itself a war for expansion...Thomas Jefferson nursed even grander plans for empire."<sup>13</sup>

Warren Zimmermann himself knows something of the practical side of imperialism. He was the last U.S. ambassador to pre-civil war Yugoslavia. Surely it is past time for leftists to abandon the Whitmanesque celebratory myths of a democratic American manifest destiny.

This, I believe, is the most important task for the antiwar and social justice movements in the United States today—to assume the responsibility of being citizens of an empire that must be dismantled. How do we deal with a settler state, the white republic that everyone almost agrees, erroneously, is a popular democracy with flaws that has gone terrible off the tracks during the Bush administration. How do we begin to figure out the present insanity without considering the origins of the United States?

1. Peter Baker, "Wrong Turn in Nasiriyah Led to Soldiers' Capture Maintenance Company Drove Into Waiting Ambush," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2003.

2. Edward Said, "Give Us Back Our Democracy: Americans Have Been Cheated and Lied To," ([www. CounterPunch.org](http://www.CounterPunch.org), 4/21/03).
3. Perry Miller, *Errand in the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 114.
4. Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition* (New York: New American Library, 1965), 2.
5. Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 229.
6. Kamen, *Inquisition*, 117–118.
7. Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, *España, un enigma histórico* (2 vols.)(Buenos Aires, 1962), I, 677.
8. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 42.
9. Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 168.
10. L. Perry Curtis, Jr., ed., *Apes and Angels* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1971).
11. Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1997), 95.
12. Samir Amin, *Empire of Chaos* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992), 9.
13. Zimmermann, *First Great Triumph* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2002), 17.