

Rethinking Schools

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The Marines Have Landed



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By Bob Peterson

In the wake of the terrorist bombings of September 11, 2001, a wave of horror and patriotism swept the United States. Virtually everyone agreed that those who practice terrorism against innocent civilians should be brought to justice. What's more difficult for Americans to realize, however, is that the interests of our own security, and the pursuit of a more just world, are best served by a critical look at U.S. foreign policy, a policy that has engendered resentment in much of the world.

Woody Guthrie used to sing that "some will rob you with a six-gun, others with a fountain pen." There are a number of global "fountain pen" organizations, such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. But the six-gun was the colonizers' preferred means to divide the world between rich and poor nations. And the six-gun has been - and still is - used to enforce global inequality, and to crush alternative paths of economic development.

The British used military force in India and throughout Africa, the Spanish throughout the Americas, the French in Algeria and Indochina, the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique, and the Dutch in the East Indies. Throughout human history, empires and nations have used military force to get their way. In fact, school history textbooks tend to focus on, and even romanticize, the military feats of various periods.

Usually left out of such books is a critical examination of how the United States has used - and continues to use - military intervention to control other lands and peoples for the economic interests of its dominant classes. As president, George Washington ordered his army to burn and destroy Native American villages in New York. Since that time virtually every U.S. president has ordered the U.S. military to intervene in at least one foreign country or territory. It is a sad, usually neglected story.

The U.S. interventions that make it into school textbooks are usually described from the perspective of the U.S. policymakers who ordered the interventions. In 1846, for example, the United States invaded Mexico and after the ensuing war, forced Mexico to "sell" nearly half its territory to the United States. Textbook maps ratify this conquest with sanitary terms like "Mexican Cession." There was significant opposition to that war in the United States - from pacifists like Henry Thoreau to the Irish-American soldiers who, disgusted with the brutal treatment of the Mexicans by the U.S. army, mutinied and joined the Mexican side as the San Patricio Brigade. That part of the story goes untold in most textbooks.

In the 1898 Spanish-American War, the United States acquired Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines through armed force, wresting control from the former colonial power of Spain. Many people in those countries, however, wanted to be independent - to form their own governments without Spanish or U.S. control. In the Philippines such sentiment was particularly strong. It took 75,000 U.S. soldiers fighting for three horrific years to defeat the Filipinos in their war for independence. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge explained why the United States wanted the Philippines: "We must on no account let the islands go: The American flag is up and it must stay, it will keep us open to the markets of China." Labor leader Samuel Gompers called it "an unjust war" and Mark

Twain wrote passionately against it.

The Spanish-American War marked a turning point for U.S. foreign policy. The United States became recognized as a world power and acted as such. Big business and government colluded to use the military to make the world safe for U.S. commerce. President Wilson explained, "Our industries have expanded to such a point that they will burst their jackets if they cannot find a free outlet to the markets of the world."

The U.S. military occupied countries like Haiti and Nicaragua for decades. In 1911, for example, Nicaragua failed to pay its debts to U.S. companies. President Taft sent in the Marines. A few years later, President Wilson sent Marines to the Dominican Republic and Haiti. U.S. troops stayed in Haiti for 19 years and killed an estimated 78,000 people. President Wilson noted that "the U.S. was involved in a struggle to command the economic fortunes of the world." In 1914 he ordered troops to seize the Mexican port city of Veracruz while Mexican patriots like Pancho Villa were fighting to help the landless and the poor.

A few years later, the United States joined forces with 14 other nations to invade the newly established Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution. Despite the sad evolution of the Soviet Union into a dictatorship, many working people around the world did look to the revolution as a form of social democracy that would bring increased equality. The United States and other European powers didn't want non-capitalist alternative forms of government to be successful, as they were afraid working people in their own countries and elsewhere around the world would get similar ideas. (This was not so far-fetched, as 1917 was a year of huge electoral gains for the Socialist Party throughout the United States.) U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing defended the intervention, saying that the Russian revolutionaries sought "to make the ignorant and incapable mass of humanity dominant in the earth" and that they were appealing "to a particular class and not to all classes of society, a class which does not have property but hopes to obtain a share by process of government rather than by individual enterprise. This is of course a direct threat at existing social order in all countries."

But it was after World War II, with the decline in power of the old British and French colonial powers, that United States interventionist activity increased most dramatically. Richard Barnet of the Institute of Policy Studies estimates that since WWII, the United States intervened abroad on the average of once every six months - either overtly with military troops or covertly with the Central Intelligence Agency - to overthrow or prop up a government in the Third World. The list of the most notorious span the globe: Iran, in 1953; Guatemala, in 1954; Lebanon, in 1958; Cuba, in 1961; Guyana, in 1962; Brazil, in 1964; The Dominican Republic, in 1965; Vietnam, 1960-1975; Laos, 1971-1973; Cambodia, 1969-1975; Chile, in 1973; Nicaragua, 1981-1990; El Salvador, 1982-1990; Grenada, in 1983. And these are just the tip of an interventionist iceberg.

Certainly the most important U.S. intervention in the last half century was in Vietnam. The United States began its involvement by siding with the French (who had colonized Vietnam in the mid-19th century) and those Vietnamese who had collaborated with the Japanese during World War II. These forces opposed Ho Chi Minh (the most prominent leader advocating Vietnamese independence) and his followers even though the Vietnamese had worked closely with the Allied war effort. Ho Chi Minh, who headed the Indochinese Communist Party and later the nationalist Viet Minh, had written numerous letters to President Truman and the State Department asking for America's help in winning Vietnamese independence from the French and finding a peaceful solution for his country. Ho Chi Minh modeled the new Vietnamese declaration of independence on the U.S. declaration, beginning it with "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...." But this counted for little in Washington. All of Ho's efforts were ignored. By 1954, the United States was paying for more than 75% of the French effort to reconquer Vietnam.

Years later, President Eisenhower admitted that "had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80% of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh." But U.S. policymakers discounted the popular sentiment for independence and were frightened by the radical social justice programs of the Vietnamese Communists. The United States sent military advisors in 1960 and then upwards of a half million troops to oppose Vietnamese independence. It dropped more tons of bombs on Vietnam than all the tonnage dropped by the Allies during the entire Second World War. It also used massive amounts of chemical defoliants and anti-personnel bombs - small explosive devices designed to kill and maim people but not to harm property. Twenty-three years later, and after as many as 3 million deaths, the United States withdrew its military forces from Vietnam.

Why would the United States waste so many lives, wreak havoc on the environment, and squander so much money? Simply put, Vietnam was the threat of a good example. In the words of British economist Joan Robinson, the U.S. war against Vietnam was "a campaign against development." As Robinson points out, the United States has used force "to try to suppress every popular movement that aims to overthrow ancient or modern tyranny and begin to find a way to overcome poverty and establish national self-respect." Thus the "Vietnam War" was about more than just Vietnam. It was as much aimed at other social movements around the world that might seek to free their countries from the global capitalist system that relegates poor countries to being suppliers of raw materials and cheap labor.

In earlier European colonial domination, racism justified brutality and prevented the invaders from imagining viable, independent societies managed by people of color. This was the case also in Vietnam. Here's the former Commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, explaining why it's OK to kill so many Vietnamese: "Well, the Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful; life is cheap in the Orient. And as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important."

AN EXPANDED ARSENAL

Under the guise of defending the "free world," U.S. foreign policy has consisted of a double standard: hostility toward dictatorial Soviet bloc countries, but friendship and millions of aid dollars to repressive right-wing regimes such as Franco's Spain, apartheid South Africa, the Shah's Iran, and the brutal military rulers of Brazil.

Sometimes U.S. interventions are out in the open - christened with high-sounding speeches and patriotic drumming. Sometimes they are covert - with CIA agents or military intelligence intervening in another nation's affairs through espionage, financial support of reactionary groups, and covert military operations like sabotage, assassination of leaders, and providing arms to rebel forces.

These methods proved particularly effective in Iran in 1953, just when many Middle Eastern countries were beginning to recognize the potential of their oil reserves. In 1953 Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh was overthrown in a joint U.S./British operation. Mossadegh had been elected to his position by a large majority of parliament, but he had made the mistake of spearheading the movement to nationalize a British-owned oil company, the sole oil company operating in Iran. The U.S./British-supported coup restored the Shah of Iran to absolute power and began a period of 25 years of repression and torture. The oil industry was restored to foreign ownership, although the post-coup division was 40% each for British and U.S. corporations and 20% for corporations from other countries.

The United States also poured millions of dollars into undermining and overthrowing the socialist democracy of Salvador Allende in Chile in the 1970s.

Another famous - although less successful - covert attempt that has been well documented is the CIA's efforts to kill Cuban President Fidel Castro. The CIA did everything from hiring snipers, to putting an explosive in Castro's cigar, to poisoning his drinks. These initiatives were launched even though it is against U.S. law for a government agency to attempt to kill the leader of another government.

For some U.S. citizens, it's hard to see how the democratic ideals represented in our Declaration of Independence are not contradicted by such a Big Stick foreign policy.

But there are clear patterns that can be discerned from studying the history of U.S. interventions. When pressed, U.S. policymakers claim the issue is "freedom." But U.S. interventions have installed or propped up too many tyrants, from Diem in Vietnam to Somoza in Nicaragua, for this to ring true.

At issue is a different kind of freedom: the "freedom" of multinational corporations to locate in whatever country they choose, extract raw materials cheaply, hire workers at low wages, and sell their products, regardless of consequences on domestic industries.

And, as Joan Robinson noted, it is also about making sure that no society has a chance to organize

itself around principles of human need rather than private profit. For years Cuba had better health care, housing, and education for its people than all other Latin American countries; this threatened the notion that societies could "develop" only through private ownership. If a small country like Cuba could dramatically reduce poverty, despite a U.S.-orchestrated campaign of economic and political isolation, what might a larger and wealthier country like Brazil or Argentina be able to do?

As we "rethink globalization," we are tempted to see global inequality, poverty, and environmental destruction as primarily caused by economic factors: IMF structural adjustment programs; WTO-mandated restrictions on the production and sale of life-saving drugs; the spread of free market principles; the octopus-like reach of advertising; and the sweatshop exploitation of Third World workers by transnational corporations.

But military intervention has paved the way for economic penetration. Like the neighborhood bully who has regularly beaten up his weaker peers, after awhile he can ease up: Everyone knows what he's capable of doing to enforce his will. The United States is a bully, and Third World nations and social movements understand what they risk should they defy its mandates.

Bullies or not, we still need to focus on making the "neighborhood" - the world - more just. For people of good will in this country the question is: What should we do when a third of the world's population lives in poverty, when according to UNICEF nearly 33,000 children die each day of malnutrition-related diseases?

Something is wrong with how the world's resources are distributed. Something is wrong with the structure of the global economy. What can we do to help solve these problems, not make them worse? How can we help create the political climate in our own country so that social movements around the world can pursue alternative paths of development without being attacked? Given the long history of military interventions, people who live in the United States must urgently confront these questions.

Bob Peterson (repmilw@aol.com) is a fifth grade teacher at La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and is a Rethinking Schools editor.

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