

Imperialism and Revolution



Lesson #3

From Sea to Shining Sea

September 5, 2019

We are seeking to understand the actual historic reasons for the spectacular ascent of the United States from 1776 to 1968. Last time, we saw that a lucrative trading relation with the slaveholders of the Caribbean fueled the accumulation of capital for farmers in the Northeastern United States. Today, we explore a second historic factor in the U.S. ascent, namely, the territorial expansion of the United States during the nineteenth century.

The United States of America was constructed on a foundation different from that of the modern nation-states of Europe. In Europe, the modern nation-state was forged on the basis of a common ethnic identity and language, with a monarch attaining the centralization of power with the support a rising merchant class. The United States of America was founded as a federation of English settler colonies, on the basis of censuses with respect to democratic and republican values, although still limited in its conception.

In spite of the moral foundation of the American republic, the new nation could not escape the European tendency toward conquest and domination, raging with force on a global scale. The political culture of the

young Republic was not sufficiently mature to understand that its unique origins could imply a new road of economic and social development not based on conquest, but on mutually beneficial trade with other nations and peoples. Not envisioning this possibility, the young American Republic entered without constraint into an unfolding global competition among empires that were seeking the conquest, domination, and control of the lands and peoples of the planet.

At that time, the British empire was in the lead in the competition among the world's empires for territorial control of the earth, followed closely by France. Both were conquering vast regions of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean. Spain had taken the lead in the sixteenth century by conquering much of the Americas, but its use of the exploited resources contributed to the development of Northwestern Europe, and not its own development; by the early nineteenth century, the disintegration of the Spanish empire had begun.

For the United States of America, entering the competition among imperialisms for control of the land and peoples of the planet initially meant, above all, attaining control of vast stretches of the North American continent, and in this political goal, they found themselves in conflict with the English, Spanish, and French empires. Taking advantage of opportunities created by inter-imperialist rivalries, the young Republic was able to negotiate the acquisition of lands with the European imperialisms. France was pressured by an impending inter-imperialist war with Great Britain and by the anti-colonial resistance of blacks in Haiti and the indigenous nations of the Louisiana Territory. As a result, France decided to sell to the USA the immense land area from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, which it had recently acquired by pressuring Spain to sell. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the territory of the United States. In 1812, Spain ceded Florida to the USA, in exchange for U.S. recognition of Spanish colonial claims over Texas. And agreements of 1842 and 1846 resolved conflicting claims between the United States and Britain, finalizing the border between the USA and Canada, which included the U.S. acquisition of the Oregon territory.

In the acquisition of lands from the European empires, it was a question of a nation-state ceding its claims to territory. The actual subjugation of the indigenous peoples living in the territories was another matter. The ceding of territorial claims simply meant that the European empires would not interfere with the subjugation of the indigenous populations by the U.S. government.

During the 1820s and 1830s, six great indigenous nations were forcibly relocated to the west of the Missouri River. Some 4000 of the 18,000 Cherokee died during the forced march, an historic event known as "The Trail of Tears." Prior to their forced relocation, the Cherokee had attempted to survive by adapting to the white man's world. Led by chief Sequoya, they became farmers, artisans, and property holders; they invented writing for their language, published a newspaper, and established a legislative council. And they had taken their case to the U.S. Supreme Court. But the Cherokee adaptation strategy did not succeed in preventing their relocation.

The U.S. expansionist drive came up against the territory of the newly independent nation of Mexico, leading to a U.S. war of aggression against Mexico from 1846 to 1848. Following the occupation of Mexico City by the U.S. Army, Mexico ceded immense territory to the USA, including the present states of Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and California. In the peace accord, the USA agreed to respect the language of the Mexican citizens now residing in its territory, and to recognize their land ownership claims. But these terms were not carried out in practice. Mexicans became Mexican-Americans, with landholders robbed of their lands, and with the people under the jurisdiction of institutions in which the English language was mandated.

In the second half of the twentieth century, expansionism drove the nation west of the Mississippi River to the Pacific coast. Adapting to population pressures provoked by the unfolding Spanish and English conquest of North America, the Great Plains indigenous societies had developed a horse nomadic way of life, based on the hunting of the buffalo. The techniques of buffalo hunting were relatively easily adapted to military

resistance against the U.S. Army. The Sioux and the Apache, and their leaders Crazy Horse and Geronimo, became legendary for their heroic resistance. The wars of aggression and conquest of the indigenous nations were carried out from 1864 to 1890, essentially completing the territorial expansion of the nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts of the continent.

The conquest of the West was central to the spectacular U.S. economic ascent. Immigrants at first from Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, and later from Southern and Eastern Europe, provided labor for the economic development of the conquered territories. The indigenous peoples themselves, mostly confined to reservations, were excluded from the economic expansion. Mexican-Americans were included as a landless low-wage agricultural labor force, with economic and social conditions fundamentally different from those of the European immigrants.

The U.S. patriotic hymn “America the Beautiful” celebrates the natural beauty of the land and its expansive territory from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, “from sea to shining sea.” It is good and necessary for all peoples, including the peoples of the United States, to appreciate the natural beauty of their lands and the accomplishments of their nations. Furthermore, we all have the patriotic duty to defend our nations, and to work to make them better, because a just, democratic, and sustainable world can only be built by a community of nations, with each nation conducting itself in accordance with the universal values that the peoples of humanity are proclaiming.

However, we cannot allow patriotic sentiments to blind us to reality, and to the historic factors that have shaped the contemporary reality. The conquest of the West contradicted the democratic values proclaimed by the nation at its founding. During the course of the nineteenth century, the nation cast aside a possible alternative road based on the fulfillment of the promise of democracy.

It is not that the peoples of the United States should condemn its nineteenth century leaders as racist white men. They were doing what other nation-states were doing, and what has been the mainstream tendency of humanity since the agricultural revolution. It is unreasonable to judge the comportment of men and women by anything other than the context defined by their historical epoch.

But we should understand that the conquest of the West turned away from the steps taken toward democracy in 1776; the conquest of the West established a course for the nation that has continued through various stages to this day. And what is more, we should understand that, in the context of the sustained structural crisis of the world-system, the historic road of economic advancement through conquest is no longer possible for humanity.

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

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