

Imperialism and Revolution



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FDR, JFK, and Jimmy Carter: The incapacity of imperialism to reform

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In our last two programs, we have seen that, first, U.S. imperialism consists of policies designed to provide the U.S. economy with access to the raw materials, cheap labor, and markets of supposedly independent nations; and secondly, U.S. foreign policy from 1898 to 1979 was continuously shaped by imperialist premises.

Today we look at three reformist proposals, proposed by sectors of the U.S. power elite, that did not succeed, because they failed to grasp the fact that imperialist policies pursue U.S. interests in the context of a neocolonial world-system, and that a reform of imperialist conduct by the neocolonial dominant global power would require structural reform of the world-system itself, which the United States was not politically prepared to undertake.

As World War II was moving toward an allied victory, the United States was demanding unconditional surrender by Germany and Japan, thereby placing the United States in a position to shape the terms of

peace. In this context, Franklin Roosevelt conceived of a new post-war world order in which the United States would be the dominant power, but there would be a balance of power and cooperation among the great powers, which now included the Soviet Union. He understood that Soviet foreign policy toward Eastern Europe reflected a historic concern of the Russian Empire to establish a buffer between itself and the Western European powers. Accordingly, he anticipated peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union, with economic competition but not military confrontation. Moreover, he advocated granting independence to the European colonies in Asia and Africa, thereby breaking up the extensive British and French colonial empires. He expected that the political-economic elites of the newly independent nations would have a degree of economic autonomy, and they would receive financial aid to support their economic development, so that greater global equality would gradually emerge. In accordance with this view, in his famous declaration of "four freedoms," Roosevelt declared that every person in the world has to right to what he called "freedom from want."

Roosevelt's formulation, however, did not take into account the degree to which the economic development of the United States was tied to access to the raw materials, labor, and markets of the formerly colonized nations, nor that such U.S. and European access was the principal obstacle to the economic development of the newly independent nations. If the newly independent nations were to advance in their development project, they would be required in many instances to block access by the USA and the European powers. If this were to be accepted by the global powers, it could only occur because the global powers would be gradually reforming their own economies, seeking the road to an economic development that does not depend on the exploitation and superexploitation of other lands.

Long before it could be determined if the world-system would be able to confront these economic realities and emancipate itself from neocolonial domination, Roosevelt's vision encountered more immediate political and economic obstacles. Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, were men who lacked the humanist vision of FDR. They were aware that the war had created U.S. economic dependency on war industries; and that the peacetime reconversion of industry and the reinsertion of soldiers into a peacetime economy confronted obstacles. The Truman administration, therefore, discarded Roosevelt's vision and turned to an expansion of the war industries, justified by the Cold War ideology, which falsely portrayed Soviet foreign policy as expansionist.

The second reform proposal was President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, conceived as a necessary political response to the popular appeal of the Cuban Revolution. The proposal intended reforms in land distribution in Latin America, thereby standing in opposition to the Latin American landed oligarchy, which up to then has been the principal protector of U.S. imperialist interests in the region. The Kennedy strategy was to support the reformist sector of Latin American owners of industry, whose reformist interests up to that time had been blocked by the powerful landed oligarchy. However, the Alliance for Progress was not developing a base for an independent national industrial development, in that investments were channeled to industries that were beneficial to U.S. interests. As the Cuban scholar Jesus Arboleya has written, "The modernization that Kennedy proposed for Latin America was not based on the development of an independent national bourgeoisie as an alternative to the traditional oligarchy. Rather, it was based on producing a 'new class' that, more than related to, would form a part of US transnational corporations and would share their interests. In short, [the Alliance for Progress] aspired to consolidate US neocolonialism in the region, through the articulation of a new relation of dependency, which would require a national class organically tied to foreign capital."

Such a formulation creates a political problem. The emerging urban industrial elite is assigned the task of taking on the powerful landed oligarchy, and in order to do so, it has to mobilize popular support. But as an emerging elite that is subordinate to foreign interests, it is politically incapable of mobilizing the people, because anti-imperialist popular movements have inculcated among the people concepts in favor of national sovereignty and in opposition to foreign control. An economically dependent national bourgeoisie cannot lead the nation in a project of independent economic development, a problem that the Kennedy plan did not foresee. Nor did the plan see that political stability in the neocolony can be attained when the

dominant neocolonial power ceases the exploitation of the neocolony for its economic benefit, that is to say, when the neocolony ceases being a neocolony and enters into a network of international relations shaped by the principles of mutually beneficial economic relations, the equality and sovereignty of all nations, and non-interference of the affairs of states.

With such inherent contradictions, the Alliance for Progress could not capture the support of necessary key actors in Latin America. Meanwhile, in the North, the Johnson administration lacked commitment to the plan, and it was abandoned.

Jimmy Carter, U.S. President from 1977 to 1981, announced at the beginning of his presidency that U.S. foreign policy would be based on respect for human rights. In 1977, Carter declared, "Being confident in our own future, we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear." He hoped that an emphasis on human rights would restore the idealism that had been lost as a result of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal.

Carter, however, did not question the fundamental structures of the neocolonial world-system. He accepted as given that U.S. policy would continue to promote the economic and financial penetration of U.S. corporations and financial institutions. Seeking moral policies in the context of immoral global structures, he underestimated the extent to which the elimination of human rights violations would contradict U.S. economic interests. Inasmuch as U.S. imperialist interests were obstacles to the economic development of the Third World, such policies provoke anti-imperialist protests and movements, which often gives rise to repression on the part of governments assigned the task of social control. Repression was necessary for the preservation of the U.S. economic advantages that were inherent in the structures of the neocolonial world-system. Accordingly, from 1977 to 1980, the Carter Administration found that it had to set aside its commitment to human rights in its policies toward South Korea, China, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Iran, for it had to take into account its imperialist economic interests in these countries.

Thus, in the period 1946 to 1979, imperialism was unable to reform itself. The neocolonial world-system continued on its path of self-destruction, continuing to base its advances on the domination and superexploitation of the great majority of the peoples, even as it was reaching and overextending the geographical and ecological limits of the earth, and even as the neocolonized peoples were increasingly capable of resisting in various forms. This path would lead the world-system to sustained structural crisis, the signs of which were beginning to become manifest in the 1970s.

We are exploring the reasons for the spectacular U.S. economic ascent from 1776 to 1968. We have seen that an important factor is the persistence of U.S. imperialist policies, giving the nation access to raw materials, cheap labor, and markets. And we see that the United States repeatedly demonstrated insufficient political consciousness to change its direction.

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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