

The Record

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America, Obama and anti-colonial dilemma

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U.S. history, seen through colonial lens: Suez in 1956, below left, and Vietnam in 1968.



THE ARRIVAL of the documentary film "2016" to [Bergen County](#) is sure to reignite controversy surrounding President Obama's political philosophy.

The film explores sensitive points about Obama's youthful intellectual exposure to anti-colonialist thought and outlines what America might look like if the president is reelected. In so doing, it inadvertently uncovers a latent schizophrenia in the interpretation of U.S. history: our anti-colonial dilemma.

How did it come to pass that the United States has become a symbol of neo-imperialism in so much of the world when we began our national existence as the first anti-imperialist nation ever? The ideals of 1776, uniquely expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution,

have served as the pillars of all subsequent struggles for freedom. Even North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh was enamored of them.

True, our small foray into imperialism in 1898 resulted in acquiring territories from Spain, notably the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Early on, the Philippines, judged unready for independence after the war, were promised freedom by 1944. Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens in 1917.

In contrast to this "colonial" record has been our periodic 20th-century intervention in Latin American affairs. Noteworthy interventions included Nicaragua between 1912 and 1933, when Augusto Cesar Sandino emerged as the rebel leader, and again between 1981 and 1990 against the Sandinistas (named in memory of Sandino); Guatemala in 1954, when we backed a coup; Dominican Republic in 1965; Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989. Clearly, in our own hemisphere, the schizophrenia of our anti-colonial dilemma frequently surfaces.

But the real watershed for passage of the United States from the champion of anti-colonialism to neo-imperialist power comes with the post World War II changes that redefined the entire political profile of the planet. First, our European allies were all colonial powers, determined to hang on to empire even as their defeats in Africa and Asia spawned national independence movements. Second, the Cold War with the Soviet Union — which might, at some point turn nuclear-hot — meant we had to support our allies.

The first turning point defining the American dilemma came with the Suez crisis of 1956. Britain, France and Israel went to war against Nasser's Egypt when it sought to nationalize the Suez Canal. To the surprise of the French and British, their powerful NATO leader, the United States did not support them.

A sea change had occurred in the diplomacy of the time. The Cold War merged with anti-colonialism as Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev began exploiting Third World (still mostly colonies) aspirations. Under the leadership of Dag Hammarskjold, the United Nations launched its first-ever peacekeeping force, and it, the Soviet Union and the United States forced an end to the war. Unfortunately for America, it was the Soviets, not the Americans, who filled the influence vacuum in the Middle East, supporting Egypt and Syria (still today) and, later, other states that left the Franco-British orbit.

Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, what had been a struggle to contain aggressive communism in Korea was melding into American replacement of France in Indochina. In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower was talking domino theories, and by 1956, the American Military Assistance Group had begun operations in Indochina.

In Africa, after the Suez crisis, independence movements exploded. By 1960, 18 former European colonies had gained freedom. In 1961, the Third World non-alignment movement, led by figures such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Sukarno of Indonesia and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, became a major force in the United Nations and world politics.

America's certification as a neo-imperialist power came with the Congo crisis of 1960. When, under serious pressure in its colony and from world opinion, Belgium granted the Congo independence in June 1960, the land was woefully unprepared for it. By July, the new nation was fragmenting with Katanga province, leading world producer of uranium and industrial diamonds, seceding with encouragement from Belgium. Leftist Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba asked for help from the United Nations and from the Soviets. Lumumba was later murdered by separatists aligned with Belgium.

In the end, it seemed that the whole world took sides in this catastrophe: the Soviet Union, Cuba (which declared itself a communist state in 1961) China and Egypt. On the other side was Belgium and — oh, my! — the United States (sans France and Britain).

The United Nations assumed an active military role to reunify the Congo, but the successful effort was blunted when Hammerskjold died in a 1961 plane crash while on a peace mission to Africa.

After the Congo crisis, there was no going back. We were tarred with the paint of imperialism. No sooner done in the Congo than involved in Vietnam. Ever since, it has been fashionable in many circles to view the United States as the neo-colonial imperialist power par excellence, even though international politics underwent another radical upheaval with the end of the Cold War in 1991.

Now, globalism came to the forefront of political thinking. There were no more colonies to be freed, but, oddly, anti-colonialism acquired a transposed definition and a new back-history. In some quarters, all European and American expansion was deemed reprehensible, a genocide against the indigenous — especially in the New World.

So when it came time to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Columbus' discovery, it was suddenly and summarily canceled, thus seeming to confirm European (and, by extension, United States) guilt at having led the world from the Middle Ages onward. Today, in new curriculums, movies and global propaganda, Americans in the United States are taught to be ashamed of the homeland.

Furthermore, in the new global setting, anti-colonialists are demanding reparations for perceived past injuries.

The United States must reject these positions. America began as a beacon of freedom and remains such. No nation is perfect. We have made errors, surely. All have. But we have nourished freedom far more than any other political system in history, and we try to be better still. And that helps all people everywhere.

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