

The Grid of History: Cowboys and Indians

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by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz topics: Imperialism

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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, 2003.¹

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 which 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 1776 or thereabouts was when. Many admirable U.S. anti-imperialists have been making 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. Edward Said writes: “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, correctly, stating: “Bush looks like a cowboy.”²

That observation is also common to critics of the war 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. How many generations of children now have grown up gleefully playing cowboys and Indians?

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.

The Rise of White Supremacy and Imperialism/Capitalism

To allow no dissent from the truth was exactly the reason they had come to America.³

Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow?

Are they washed in the blood of the lamb?

As this traditional evangelical Christian hymn suggests, whiteness as an ideology is far more complex than mere skin color, although skin color has been and continues to be a key component of racism within the

United States. The origins of white supremacy as it is now experienced and institutionalized—and denied—in the United States (and, due to colonialism and imperialism, throughout the world) can be traced to the prior colonizing ventures of Christian Crusades into Muslim-controlled territories, and to the Calvinist Protestant colonization of Ireland. These were the models for the colonization of the Western Hemisphere, and are the two strands that merge in the genetic makeup of U.S. society.

The Christian Crusades against Islam/Africa gave birth to the law of *limpieza de sangre*, cleanliness of blood, which the Spanish Inquisition was mandated to investigate and determine. The Christian Crusades, particularly the Castilian conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and expulsion of Jews and Muslims, created the seed ideology and institutions for modern colonialism with its necessary tools—racist ideology and justification for genocide. The law of *limpieza de sangre* was perhaps the most important cargo on the 1492 voyage of Christopher Columbus, sailing under the flag of Spain.

Great Britain emerged as an overseas colonial power a century later than Spain, and absorbed aspects of the Spanish caste system into its colonialist rationalizations, particularly regarding African slavery, within the context of chosen people/New Jerusalem Calvinism and Puritanism.

In the pre-formation of the United States, Puritanism and Calvinist Protestantism uniquely refined white supremacy as a political/religious ideology (a covenant with God) requiring the shedding of white blood for purification. The Ulster-Scots Calvinists were the settler/colonizers of Northern Ireland and constituted a majority of settlers in the western lands over the Appalachian/Allegheny spine of English North America. Their origin story became the origin story of the United States. It tells of pilgrim/settlers doing God's will and forging into the promised land, being surrounded by savages, and killing the heathen (first the Irish in Ulster, then the Native Americans in North America). Thereby, the sacrifice and blood shed is perceived as proof of the sanctity and purity of the nation itself. All the descendants of those who made such sacrifices are the true inheritors of the land.

The Crusades and Purity of Blood

In the eighth century, Muslims came to power in all but the northern fringe of the Iberian Peninsula and ruled for centuries. However, by the end of the fifteenth century, the last Muslim state held only a foothold in Granada, an enclave on the southeastern coast surrounded by the expansionist Christian monarchies of Castile and Aragon. During those intervening seven hundred years, various Christian kingdoms based in the north of the peninsula attacked Moorish territory, seizing their lands and properties. The Christian crusaders named this process *La Reconquista*, the reconquest. This military/religious project created the institutions and practices later established in Spanish America, especially the *encomienda* (conquered land granted to the conquistador along with the people on it, with the conquistador earning the noble title of *hidalgo*).

The Reconquest meant the slow and systematic extension of Christian power over all those lands that had been Muslim since the eighth century, and so involved the clash of Christian and Muslim armies and societies. What the Reconquest destroyed, however, was the racial and religious coexistence, which despite incessant armed conflict had distinguished the society of mediaeval Spain. It was claimed by a contemporary that when the Christians went to war against the Moors, it was 'neither because of the law (of Mahommed) nor because of the sect that they hold to', but because of the lands they occupied and for this reason alone.⁴

Before Christian aggression and eventual expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula, Christians, Jews, and Muslims had enjoyed a mutual tolerance so the question of racial or religious conflict had not existed.

The Vatican created the original institution of the Inquisition in 1179 for routing out Christian heretics, the

original mandate being free of racialization. However, the 1400s in Spain saw increasing Inquisition investigations of *conversos*, that is, Christian converted Jews, and of *moriscos*, Christian converted Muslims. Jews and Muslims who refused to convert were finally deported *en masse* from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century. (It is said that Columbus watched the people being loaded on to ships for deportation as he set sail in 1492).

Before this time the concept of biological race based on “blood” is not known to have existed as law or taboo in Christian Europe or anywhere else in the world.⁵ As scapegoating and suspicion of *conversos* and *moriscos* intensified in Christian Spain, the doctrine of *limpieza de sangre*, “purity of blood,” was popularized and had the effect of granting psychological, and increasingly legal, privileges to “Old Christians” thereby obscuring the class differences between the poor and the rich, *i.e.* between the landed aristocracy and the land-poor peasants and shepherds. In Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* the impoverished Sancho Panza says, “I am an Old Christian, and to become an earl that is sufficient,” to which Don Quixote replies, “And more than sufficient.” And Cervantes’ contemporary, Lope de Vega, wrote in his *PeribE1F1ez*: “*soy un hombre, /aunque de villana casta, /limpio de sangre y jam /de hebrea o mora manchada*” (I am a man, although of lowly status, yet clean of blood and with no mixture of Jewish or Moorish blood.)

What we witness in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Spain is the first instance of class leveling based on imagined biological racial differences, indeed the origin of white supremacy, the necessary ideology of colonial projects in America and Africa. We see here the beginnings of the “thousand year Reich” of settler capitalism/colonialism, and its characteristic tug of war over the hearts and minds of the majority of the settlers—the yeomanry, and later the “white” working classes. Historian David Stannard, in his *American Holocaust*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) adds to Elie Wiesel’s famous observation, that the road to Auschwitz was paved in the earliest days of Christendom, the *caveat* that on the way to Auschwitz the road led straight through the heart of America. The ideology of white supremacy was paramount in neutralizing the class antagonisms of the landless against the landed, and in the distribution of the confiscated lands and properties of Moors, Jews, and of Irish, Native Americans and Africans. Kamen describes the process in fifteenth and sixteenth century Spain:

a situation in which the highest and lowest classes could maintain social mobility without great fear of social distinction...as with the genuine aristocracy, the concepts of honour, pride and *hidalguEDA* become the very foundations of action...In so far as this concept of honour was identified with the virtues of the Old Christian nobility, deference to honour became deference to the nobility...the Castilian nobility continued to regard their functions as essentially the same that they had always been. Their task was to fight and not to labour. *HidalguEDA* would not permit a nobleman, even the lowest rank of nobleman, to labour or to trade...⁶

The “Old Christian” Spanish, whatever their economic situation, were allowed to identify with the worldview of the nobility. As one Spanish historian puts it, “the common people looked upwards, wishing and hoping to climb, and let themselves be seduced by chivalric ideals: honour, dignity, glory, and the noble life.”⁷

We can also locate the origin of genocide and its linkage to colonialism in the late 1400s in Spain. Two punishments were devised to root out uncertain Christians deemed to have unclean blood: the extermination of many burned at the stake and the social isolation and persecution of the rest.

Ireland and the English Inquisition

During the early 1600s the English conquered Northern Ireland, and declared a half-million acres of land open to settlement; the settlers who contracted with the devil of early colonialism came mostly from western Scotland. England had previously conquered Wales and southern and eastern Ireland, but had never previously attempted on such a scale to remove the indigenous population and “plant” settlers. The

English policy of exterminating Indians in North America was foreshadowed by this English colonization of Northern Ireland. The ancient Irish social system was systematically attacked, traditional songs and music forbidden, whole clans exterminated and the remainder brutalized. A “wild Irish” reservation was even attempted.⁸ The planted settlers were Calvinist Protestants, assured by their divines that they had been chosen by God for salvation (and title to the lands of Ulster). The native (and Papist) Irish were definitely not destined for salvation, but rather the reverse, both in the present and hereafter.

The “plantation” of Ulster followed centuries of intermittent warfare in Ireland, and was as much the culmination of a process as a departure. In the sixteenth century, the official in charge of the Irish province of Munster, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, ordered that:

The heddes of all those (of what sort soever thei were) which were killed in the daie, should be cutte off from their bodies and brought to the place where he incamped at night, and should there bee laied on the ground by eche side of the waie ledying into his owne tente so that none could come into his tente for any cause but commonly he muste passe through a lane of heddes which he used ad terrorem...[It brought] greate terrour to the people when thei sawe the heddes of their dedde fathers, brothers, children, kindsfolke, and freinds...⁹

Bounties were paid for the Irish heads brought in and later only the scalp or ears were required. A century later, in North America, Indian heads and scalps were brought in for bounty in the same manner. Native Americans picked up the practice from the colonizers. The first English colonial settlement in North America had been planted in Newfoundland in the summer of 1583, by Sir Humphrey Gilbert.

During the mid-nineteenth century, influenced by Social Darwinism, some English scientists peddled the theory that the Irish (and of course all people of color) had descended from apes, while the English were descendants of man who had been created by God in His image. Thus the English were “angels” and the Irish (and other colonized peoples) were a lower species, what today U.S. white supremacists call “mud people,” products of the process of evolution.¹⁰ It is the seventeenth century Ulster Calvinist ideology in late nineteenth century modern guise.

White Supremacy, the U.S. Origin Myth, and U.S. Imperialism

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 treaty ending the French and Indian War 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.

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 Fenimore Cooper the initial scribe. James Fenimore 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.”¹¹

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. patriotism, 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.”¹²

Why Do 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.

Of course, there are many leftist and social democratic thinkers and scholars who challenge the 1898 age of imperialism myth. Most notably, *Monthly Review* has never strayed from understanding the long history of U.S. imperialism, particularly in Latin America. Also, William Appleman Williams and a whole generation of radical U.S. historians acknowledge “empire as a way of life” the title of Williams’ 1980 book of essays (New York: Oxford University Press) that includes an exhaustive list of overseas interventions dating back to day one, giving substance to the U.S. Marine theme, “the shores of Tripoli.” And with the Iraq intervention, many antiwar critics have compiled such lists.

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 recent book on the frankly imperial aims of the Teddy Roosevelt administration, *First Great Triumph* (New York: Farrar Straus and Geroux, 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.¹³

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.

Conclusion

As a graduate student in Latin American History at UCLA in the mid-1960s, I first learned about imperialism, and it was my good fortune to have access to Marxist analysis. However, it was not until the early 1970s when I became involved as an expert witness in Native American court cases regarding U.S.-Indian treaties, that I came to grasp the true nature and development of U.S. imperialism. At that same time, a now deceased mentor, Canadian Native leader and Marxist historian, Howard Adams, gave me a book that had a great influence on me.¹⁴ That book was Pierre Jalée’s *Imperialism in the Seventies* (New York: The Third Press, 1973) which contained a brilliant introduction by Harry Magdoff. Harry’s cautionary words three decades ago resonate even more loudly today:

The major obstacle to such enlightenment is the pervasiveness of the ideological rationalization for

imperialism. The extent of this pervasiveness is not easy to perceive because such rationalization is deep-seated. Its roots are intertwined with the accepted, conventional modes of thought and the consciousness of a people. Thus, they are located in the false patriotism and racism that sink deeply and imperceptibly into the individual's sub-conscious; in the traditions, values, and even aesthetics of the cultural environment—an environment evolved over centuries during which self-designated “superior” cultures assumed the right to penetrate and dominate “inferior” cultures. These roots are also buried in the sophisticated theorems of both liberal and conservative economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, and history. For these reasons, citizens of an imperialist country who wish to understand imperialism must first emancipate themselves from the seemingly endless web of threads that bind them emotionally and intellectually to the imperialist condition.¹⁵

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.

Notes

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.
14. ↪ Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass* (Toronto: Free Press, 1974).
15. ↪ Pierre Jalée, *Imperialism in the Seventies* (New York: Third Press, 1973), xvii–xviii.