

# Imperialism and Democracy: White House or Liberty Square ?

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

Global Research, October 23, 2011  
23 October 2011

Region: [USA](#)  
Theme: [History](#)

## Introduction:

The relation between imperialism and democracy has been debated and discussed over 2500 years, from fifth century Athens to Liberty Park in Manhattan . Contemporary critics of imperialism (and capitalism) claim to find a fundamental incompatibility, citing the growing police state measures accompanying colonial wars, from Clinton 's anti-terrorist laws, and Bush's "Patriot Act" to Obama's ordering the extrajudicial assassination of overseas US citizens.

In the past, however, many theorists of imperialism of varying political persuasion, ranging from Max Weber to Vladimir Lenin, argued that imperialism unified the country, reduced internal class polarization and created privileged workers who actively supported and voted for imperial parties. A historical, comparative survey of the conditions under which imperialism and democratic institutions converge or diverge can throw some light on the challenges and choices faced by the burgeoning democratic movements erupting across the globe.

## The Nineteenth Century

During the 19th century, European and US imperial expansion covered the world. In tandem, democratic institutions took root, the franchise was extended to the working class, competitive parties emerged, social legislation was passed, and the working class increased its representation in the legislative chambers.

Was the simultaneous growth of democracy and imperialism a spurious correlation reflecting divergent and conflicting underlying forces, one favoring overseas conquest and another promoting democratic politics? In fact, there was a great deal of overlap between pro-imperialist and democratic politics and not simply among the elites.

Throughout the 19th and especially in the 20th century, important sectors of the labor and social democratic parties and numerous prominent leftists and revolutionary socialists, at one time or another combined support for workers' demands and imperial expansion. None other than Karl Marx, in his early journalistic writings in the New York Herald Tribune critically supported the British conquest of India as a "modernizing force" breaking down feudal barriers, even as he supported (with criticism) the European revolutions of 1848.

The ruling classes, the driving force of imperialism, were divided: Some saw the democratic reforms, "citizenship", as a means of raising mass conscriptions for imperial wars; others feared that the democratic reforms would enhance social demands and undercut the

accumulation of capital and rule by the elite. Both were right: Along with greater popular participation came virulent modern nationalism, which fueled empire building. At the same time mass access to democratic rights led to heightened class organizations, which threatened or challenged class rule. Within the ruling classes, democratic institutions were seen as an arena to peacefully resolve conflicts between competing sectoral elites. But once they took a mass character they were perceived as political threats.

Imperial and class-based parties competed for voters among the newly enfranchised urban workers and rural poor. In many cases, imperial and class allegiances “co-existed” within the same individuals. The question of which of the two, imperialist or class consciousness would become ‘operative’ or ‘salient’ was in part contingent on the success or failures of the larger competing political projects.

In other words, when imperial expansion succeeded in easy conquests resulting in lucrative colonies (especially settler colonies) democratic workers embraced the empire. This was the case because empire enhanced trade, namely profitable exports and cheap imports, while protecting local markets and manufacturers. These in turn expanded employment and wages for substantial sectors of the working class. As a result, labor and social democratic parties and trade unions did not oppose imperialism, indeed many supported it.

In contrast, when imperialist wars led to prolonged bloody and costly conflicts, the working class shifted from initial chauvinist enthusiasm to disenchantment and opposition. Democratic demands to ‘end the war’ led to strikes challenging unequal sacrifice. Democratic and anti-imperialist sentiments tended to fuse.

The conflict between democracy and imperialism became even more apparent in the case of an imperial defeat and military occupation. Both the defeat of France in the German-French war of 1870-71 and the German defeat in the First World War led to massive democratic socialist uprisings (the Paris Commune of 1871 and the German revolution of 1918) attacking militarism, ruling class domination and the entire imperial capitalist institutional framework.

### **The Imperialism and Democracy Debate and ‘History from Below’**

Historians, especially practitioners of the fashionable “history from below”, exaggerated the democratic values and struggles of the working class and understated the prolonged and deep felt support among important sectors for successful imperial expansion and conquest. The notion of ‘inherent’ or ‘instinctual’ class solidarity is belied by the active role of workers in imperial conquest as soldiers, overseas settlers, merchant mariners and overseers. Imperial collaborators and empire loyalists were numerous among English and French workers and, especially later, within the US labor movement.

The theoretical point is that the pre-eminence of democratic over imperial consciousness and action among workers is contingent on the practical material outcomes of imperial policies and democratic struggles.

### **Workers and Imperialism**

Empire building makes demands on workers to produce more for less in order to export and invest profitably in colonized regions. This led to capital-labor conflict, especially in the initial phase of imperial expansion. As imperial rulers consolidated their control over the colonized countries they intensified exploitation of markets, labor and resources. Imperial

exports destroyed local competitors. Profits rose, wages increased and workers turned from initial opposition toward imperialism to demanding a share of the increasing income of the export oriented manufacturers. Labor leaders and trade unionists approved of the policies of 'imperial preference', which protected local industries from competition and privileged monopoly control of colonial markets. They did so because imperial policies protected jobs and raised living standards.

Workers who were active in social struggles, blacklisted or jailed, voluntarily moved or were exiled to colonized countries. Once settled overseas, they were given privileged access to better paying jobs as overseers, skilled employees or promoted to managerial positions. Imperial based militant workers, once overseas, became colonial collaborators. Many encouraged former workmates, relatives and friends to join them as successful settlers or contract workers. The 'domestication' of workers and the reconciliation of democratic and imperialist sentiments was a cause and consequent of successful imperialism.

### **Empire Loyalism: Not by Bread Alone**

While material benefits accruing to workers from "successful imperialism" are one factor enhancing workers' imperial consciousness, this was reinforced by symbolic gratification, the sense of being a member of the "leading country in the world" where "the sun never sets on the empire", was equally important. It is rare to find a country where the majority of workers express "solidarity" with the exploited miners, plantation workers or displaced peasants and indigenous small landholders in the 'colonies'. The stronger the hold of the colonial power, the greater the 'colonial opportunities', the longer the colonial ties, the deeper the economic penetration, and the stronger the sense of imperial superiority among the imperial states' workers. It is not surprising that the British workers, the unions and Labor Party raised few objections to the savagery of the imperial opium wars against China, the imperial induced genocidal famines in Ireland in the 19th century and India in the 20th century. Likewise, the French workers' parties - Socialists especially - were in the forefront of the post WWII colonial wars against Indo-China and Algeria only turning against them in the face of imminent defeat and internal disintegration. In the same vein, US successful colonial wars against Cuba and the Philippines, its invasions of Caribbean and Central American countries were supported by the American Federation of Labor and many 'ordinary workers', even as a minority of radicalized workers opposed these wars. The 'partial turn' of labor against US colonial wars occurred during the Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan was a result of prolonged losses and high economic costs with no victory in sight. It should be added that US workers, in opposing the imperial wars, expressed no solidarity with the national liberation and workers movements of the colonized countries.

### **Imperialism and the "True Democrats"**

To argue, as some on the Left have, that imperialism does not coexist with "true" democracy, is to argue that the last 150 years have been devoid of free elections, party competition and citizens rights, however abbreviated, especially over the past decade. The reality is that imperial intervention and expansion has drawn precisely from citizens' sense of "obligation" to uphold the democratic institutions, which has enabled imperial leaders to elicit legitimacy and active citizen support or compliance in waging bloody, even genocidal, colonial wars.

If democracy has not usually been an obstacle to imperial expansion - indeed a facilitator

under certain circumstances – under what conditions have workers and citizens movements turned against imperial wars? What has been the political response of the ruling class when the majority of electorate has turned against imperial wars? In other words: When the democratic institutions no longer function as vehicles for imperial policies, what gives?

### **From Imperial Democracy to Imperial Police State**

The past ten years provide important lessons on the relation between imperialism and democracy in the United States .

Beginning with the controversial political circumstances surrounding known terrorists' gaining access to the US and subsequently hijacking the airplanes on 9/11/2001, the US government launched two major colonial wars and numerous overt 'clandestine' ground and air attacks in Somalia , Yemen , Pakistan , Libya and other countries. The "global war on terror", launched under the Bush regime, and implemented by non-elected senior militarist – Zionist officials in co-operation with NATO and Israel was supported by the democratically elected Congress. For that matter the vast majority of the electorate, influenced by an immense propaganda campaign of fear, media manipulation and lies endorsed the wars on terror.

Given the unprecedented scope and breadth of the wars, (a global war on terror), the vast increase in military spending and the huge outlays for an all encompassing internal repressive (security) apparatus (Homeland Security), a new executive-centered police state was constructed which superseded the existing democratic institution and rights of citizens.

The trajectory of imperial politics moved from early military successes to problematic prolonged occupation. This led to escalating resistance, growing state expenditures , a deepening fiscal crises , social decay and rising political opposition.

As in the past, contemporary imperial wars that are prolonged, costly and with no decisive victory in sight, have led to citizen disenchantment, followed by increased open rejection. The wage and salaried majorities who voted for imperial policymakers and backed their enabling legislation, including laws (Patriot Act) which suspended basic civil and constitutional rights, have turned away from the imperial agenda. Today the democratic majority prioritize their class, economic interests, especially in the face of a prolonged recession and unemployment and underemployment of close to 20%. Beginning in 2008-2011 endless wars and prolonged crises have set in motion a conflict between democracy and imperialism.

In other words, the democratic majority has become an obstacle to the implementation and pursuit of imperial wars. Imperial military activity in Iraq , Afghanistan , Libya , etc. did not lead to quick victories, the conquest of lucrative export markets and take-over of natural resource. Jobs were not created and no benefit accrued to employees and workers in the imperial country. High expenditures for arms undercut public investments in labor intensive employment in critically overdue infrastructures projects. The small number of dangerous jobs in occupied countries was unattractive and too risky for the unemployed.

In other words, unlike most previous imperial-colonial wars, none of the plundered wealth was used to secure workers loyalty to the empire. The burden of empire progressively undercut wage and salaried workers' living standards. Over time, regressive taxation gradually eroded any sense of chauvinist grandeur or superiority. Instead citizens of the

empire developed a political inferiority complex. Faced with determined Islamic opposition and China's rising economic power, exaggerated bellicosity among a minority and critical introspection among the majority took hold. Popular consciousness of "something basically wrong" in Washington and Wall Street took over. The earlier war chants and mindless flag-waving, as the armies of Empire marched to Afghanistan and Iraq, were replaced by angry defeatism directed at misleaders. Over 80% of the public now articulates a negative view of Congress, rejecting both war parties. Similar negative views are held toward the White House, the Pentagon and Homeland Security.

After a decade of war and four years of economic crisis, mass protests erupted, the "Occupy Wall Street" movement puts new options on the table, displacing the imperial agenda with a powerful denunciation of the militarist-financial elite.

The executive rulers, especially the judicial, intelligence and police apparatuses increasingly implemented arbitrary police state measures. Tens of millions are subject to surveillance by Homeland Security. The police state intercepts billions of faxes, e-mails, web sites and taps telephone calls. The link between imperialism and democracy broke at the point where declining empire no longer could secure the electorate's support or compliance.

More and more bizarre terrorist plots were fabricated by the intelligence agencies. The Iranian bomb plot against the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington was the most primitive and crude effort to regain public support for imperial militarism in the Gulf region. Apart from the politically influential, but infinitely small, pro-Israel Zionist power configuration, US public opinion is not distracted from its domestic agenda; its quest for jobs at home and opposition to Wall Street.

As the conflict between imperialism and democracy intensifies, the previous 'consensus' fractured. The White House and Congress opt for imperialism backed by a profoundly anti-democratic police state. The majority of the electorate presses forward, utilizing their remaining democratic rights to change the political agenda from empire toward a social republic.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that empire and democracy have been complementary in times of ascendant imperialism. We have shown that when wars of conquest have been short and inexpensive, and when the results have been lucrative for capital and job-creating for labor the democratic majorities joined in support of imperial elites. Democratic institutions flourished when overseas empires provided markets, cheap resources and raised living standards. Workers voted for imperial parties, held positive opinions of executive and legislative officials, and applauded the colonial war veterans (our troops). Some even volunteered and joined the military. With vast citizen support for empire, the state more or less 'abided' by the constitutional guarantees. But the marriage of democracy and imperialism is not 'structural'. It is contingent on a series of variable conditions, which can cause a profound rupture between the two, as we are witnessing today.

Prolonged, losing, costly imperial wars that increasingly erode living standards for over a generation have undermined the consensus between imperial rulers and democratic citizens. Early signs of this potential divergence were evident during the latter period of the Korean War, when public opinion turned against President Truman, architect of the Cold War and the US invasion of Korea. More evidence emerged during the Vietnam War. Faced with

a prolonged, losing war, which imperiled the lives and opportunities of tens of millions of draft age Americans, millions in civilian life and the military opted to end the war and question imperial interventions. The repressive state was still not organized sufficiently to terrorize and contain the democratic upsurge of the 1970's. The end of the Vietnam war represented the high point in democratic America 's quest to counter imperialism and rebuild the republic.

Subsequent small, quick, low cost and militarily successful imperial interventions in Panama , Grenada , Haiti and elsewhere did not provoke any conflict between imperialism and democracy. Nor did imperial clandestine and surrogate wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Angola, Mozambique, Afghanistan and the Balkans elicit any significant democratic opposition since they were low cost (in lives and funding) and were not accompanied by any sharp cuts in social expenditures and incomes.

The onset of the current Afghanistan , Iraq , and global offensive wars were seen by some imperial strategists in the same light: Quick, low cost victories with few domestic costs. One highly placed pro-Israel official in the Pentagon even argued that the invasion and occupation of Iraq would be "self-financing" via an oil grab.

The 21st century wars turned out otherwise: They followed the Korean-Vietnam pattern, not the Central American/Caribbean pattern. Immensely costly, the 21st century wars have not led to quick victories and, worse still, occurred in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis, without the manufacturing and market boom of the 1950's/1960's which had cushioned the retreat from Korea and Vietnam.

The divergence between imperialism and democracy has become acute. Democratic dissent has increased and the police state has become more prominent and direct. Imperialism increasingly relies on "fabricated domestic and external terror plots" to augment the powers of the repressive machinery and rule by fiat. White House exhortations ring hollow. The public puts less and less credence in their rulers' claims of 'justifiable' arbitrary detentions, massive surveillance and extrajudicial assassinations of US citizens (and even their children).

We now face long-term, large-scale dangers, inherent in imperial democracies. Not because of "internal contradictions" but because sooner or later imperial powers meet their match in the form of protracted struggles by anti-imperialist and national liberation movements. Only, when imperial wars take their toll on the wage and salaried majority, does the rupture between democracy and imperialism take place. Then and only then are democratic forces set in motion to create a democratic republic, with social justice and without empire.

The present danger is that imperial structures are deeply embedded in all the key political institutions and are backed by an unprecedented vast and sprawling police state apparatus, called Homeland Security. Perhaps it will take a major external political-military shock to ignite the kind of mass democratic uprising needed to transform an imperial police state into a democratic republic. A growing sense of isolation and impotence affects the ruling regime in the face of overseas military defeats and unyielding, deepening domestic economic crisis. The danger is that these fears and frustrations could induce the White House to attempt to regain popular support by attacking Iran under a manufactured pretext. A US/Israeli assault on Iran will result in a world-wide conflagration. Iran could and would retaliate. Saudi and Gulf oil wells would go up in flames. Vital shipping lanes would be blocked. Gas prices would skyrocket while Asian, EU and US economies crash. Iranian troops



with their Iraqi allies would lay siege to the US garrisons in Baghdad . Afghanistan , Pakistan and the rest of the Moslem world will take up arms. US forces would surrender or retreat. The war would shatter the US Treasury. Deficits would spiral out of control. Unemployment would double. This likely sequence of events would trigger a massive democratic movement and a decisive struggle between an emerging republic struggling to give birth and a decaying empire threatening to drag the world into the inferno of its own demise.

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