

# US Foreign Policy: A Reflection of the Legacy of Racism and National Oppression

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*We are here for our annual meeting in celebration of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR). Our yearly dinner was a resounding success in April with hundreds in attendance under the theme of the need to link various struggles against racism, economic exploitation and for social justice and self-determination for the majority of people who live within this society and the world.*

The topic this evening focuses is on the relationship between United States foreign and domestic policy. Why is the government constantly at war with one enemy or another abroad and at the same time failing to foster peace and stability here inside the country?

Today we witnessed the arrest of a suspect in the gruesome massacre of nine African Americans in one of the leading historic churches in the U.S. Even those within law-enforcement and the corporate media have characterized this incident as a hate crime.

Obviously this mass killing was politically motivated. The most prominent person killed in the massacre was Pastor Clementa Pinckney who is also a State Senator in South Carolina. He was in a prayer meeting and bible study at the church when a white 21-year-old male entered and stayed for some time before declaring that he was there to kill Black people.

Reports indicate that he had a criminal record for drugs and other offenses. His links to white supremacist organizations is being examined with each passing hour. He has been shown in a photograph wearing a jacket with the insignia of the former apartheid regime in South Africa and the previous settler-colony of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

Ongoing problems of racist violence and other hate crimes are consistently ignored or played down in the corporate media. The administration of President Barack Obama has been rightly criticized for not addressing the continuing, and many would say, escalating phenomenon of racist violence, hate speech and institutional racism.

## **History of Mother Emmanuel AME Church and Struggle Against National Oppression**

This church where the shooting took place occupies a proud history in the legacy of African people in the U.S. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) was founded in Philadelphia by Richard Allen, Sara Allen, Absalom Jones and others in 1787 beginning as the Free Africa Society.

When the church was formed the United States was in its infancy as a nation. The country

had inherited the institution of slavery as an economic system. Slavery existed in the Northeast as well as the South. Africans who had accepted Christianity were still subjected to racism and sought to set up their own independent places of worship.

In the Southeast during the later decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century an African Baptist Church was formed. Later in Philadelphia the AME Church went in the same direction. These places of worship did not just deal with the spiritual needs of the people but the desire for genuine freedom. The formation of the early African churches was in themselves acts of self-determination and defiance against slavery.

Perhaps the most famous co-founder of the Mother Emmanuel AME Church was Telemaque, better known as Denmark Vesey. He was born in the Denmark colony of St. Thomas in the Caribbean and later lived as a slave in Saint Domingo (Haiti). Reports of his life say that he was influenced by Africans in Haiti when the revolution erupted in 1791. He along with his master Vesey, had re-located to South Carolina by the late 1790s. He was able to win his freedom from slavery remaining in South Carolina and serving as a co-founder of the Mother Emmanuel AME Church in 1818.

In 1822 Denmark Vesey was the engineer of an elaborate plot to liberate his people from slavery. He had tried for many years to purchase the freedom of his wife and children yet the white slave masters would not free his spouse or children who were automatically placed in bondage following the rules of the system where the offspring would inherit the status of the mother.

Vesey was influenced by developments in Haiti. The Charleston County revolt was scheduled to take place on July 14, Bastille Day in France. However, a decision was made by Vesey and his comrades at the Church to move the date forward to June 16.

Demographically as a result of the slave system of agricultural production in Charleston, Africans far outnumbered whites in the area. Such a slave revolt would have sent shockwaves throughout the South and shaken the system to its core. Nonetheless, the plans for the revolt were leaked to the slave masters and Vesey along with many others were arrested, tried in a secret court and hung.

Many others were deported to Caribbean islands and other U.S. states. Morris Brown, another early leader of the AME Church was forced out of the state. I do not believe that it was a coincidence that this horrendous act of hate last evening took place just one day after the 193<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the plans for the Charleston Rebellion.

Later in August 1831, Nat Turner in South Hampton County, Virginia led another revolt which was not uncovered until the actual day of the uprising. Turner was also motivated by the Bible and notions of the fulfillment of prophecy.

The Nat Turner Revolt led to the deaths of numerous slaveholders. Turner and other were eventually apprehended and brutally executed. Nonetheless, this rebellion created a reaction on the part of the slavocracy in the South resulting in the Abolitionist Movement being born. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was a desperate measure to maintain what even many slave masters knew was a dying system of exploitation.

When John Brown attacked Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1859, it represented the initial

skirmishes of the Civil War which began in earnest in 1861 extending to 1865, breaking the back of the antebellum slave system and ushering in Reconstruction. The failure to build democracy in the aftermath of the dissolution of slavery and the defeat of the Confederacy is still with us today. It would take another century for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act to be passed.

Nonetheless, today much of the turmoil inside the U.S. is related to the inability of the American system to eradicate institutional racism and national oppression.

### **Direct Relations of Domestic and Foreign Policy**

How do these historical developments rooted in slavery provide insight into modern U.S. foreign policy? Is there a direct link between the ongoing racial oppression and the character of Washington's relations to the former colonial, semi-colonial and socialist states?

All modern wars waged whether Cold or Hot have been directed against the states within the regions of the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the former socialist countries of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since the conclusion of World War II. Today we witness the re-emerge of another Cold War with the escalation of tensions between Washington and Moscow over Ukraine, Crimea, Syria, Yemen and other geo-political areas.

In Yemen today, the Saudi Arabian monarchy is bombing the country, the most underdeveloped in the region. The Saudi Arabian and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) alliance war against Yemen is in actuality a proxy war against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which had a popular revolution in 1979 in response to the U.S. support of a monarchy which repressed its people for decades. The nationalist government of Mohamed Mossadegh was overthrown by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1953 simply because he sought to take control of Iran's oil resources.

In Palestine, the U.S. has supported the State of Israel which maintains its occupation after 67 years. The people of Gaza and the West Bank are daily subjected to the armed might of the Israeli Defense Forces and the police.

These wars in Yemen and Palestine are supported through direct U.S. tax dollars and weapons. The F-16 fighter planes now bombing Yemeni residential, communications, transport and port facilities are produced in the U.S. The same is true of the Dense Inert Metal Explosives (DIME), phosphorous bombs and other ordinances utilized by the IDF against the people of Gaza in Operation Protective Edge during 2014 right through additional attacks in recent weeks.

### **U.S. Imperialism Escalates Its Interference in North Africa**

In North Africa the situation is growing more desperate every week. Many of us have followed the tragedy of mass migrations where thousands have died just this year off the coast of Libya in the Mediterranean in desperate attempts to reach Malta and Sicily.

The current situation in Libya is a direct result of the CIA-Pentagon and NATO war of regime-change in 2011. There were over 26,000 sorties flown over Libya in 2011 and some 10,000 bombs were dropped on the North African state, previously the most prosperous on the continent under the Gaddafi government.

In Libya today there are two contending regimes claiming legitimacy as the government.

Human traffickers take advantage of the chaos to funnel migrants fleeing the impact of wars in Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and as far away as South Asia. The European Union and the U.S., which have initiated these wars, act now as if they have nothing to do with the current crisis. The EU response has been a military one which will only result in more deaths and displacement.

Also in the region, the militarized regime in Egypt is another case of failed U.S. foreign policy. Since the late 1970s, Washington and Wall Street have funded the Egyptian government under the former President Hosni Mubarak right through the present junta led by military-turned-civilian ruler Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. Thousands of Egyptians have been killed since the military coup in July 2013. The former elected President Mohamed Morsi has been sentenced to death by a court that makes a mockery of due process.

However, these failed policies continue unabated. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Sudan, the impact of U.S. foreign policy is still very much in evidence. Iraq is still at war and the administration of President Barack Obama is carrying out bombing operations against the Islamic State and re-deploying Pentagon forces ostensibly as advisers and trainers. This is the same president who ran for office in 2008 saying he would end the war in Iraq.

The U.S. support of the armed rebels in Syria led to the formation of the Islamic State which has spread into Iraq, Libya and Yemen. Despite the spending of hundreds of billions during the Iraq war by U.S. tax payers carrying out a campaign of regime-change that met popular opposition, the country is still in deep crisis.

The billions spent on weapons to arm the new Iraqi army which was crafted in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, have mainly been wasted through the capturing of these guns, tanks and other equipment by the Islamic State. At present U.S. warplanes are bombing their own weapons sent into the theater based upon untruths and psychological warfare against both the people of Iraq and the U.S.

### **Which Way Forward in Domestic and U.S. Policy?**

Therefore, we have much work to carry out in the upcoming year. Our organization faces the challenge of both addressing the need to cherish both lives here in the U.S. as well as throughout the world.

Since August 2014 with the unrest in Ferguson, the incomplete revolution in racial equality has been further exposed for the world to see. The reluctance of the Obama administration to discuss race and to develop policies that specifically address the continuing disparate class and social divide in the U.S. has borne an ever worsening situation.

Comments by Obama at the White House on events in Charleston seemed to focus more on the need for gun control. Although gun control is important, the underlying racial hatred and hostility is not fully explored.

At the same time there is almost no debate over the redeployment of military forces in Iraq. There is almost no information about the ongoing war in Syria. Most people in the U.S. who watch the news originating from inside the country are barely aware of the war in Yemen and the role of Washington in this genocidal process.

Consequently, we need to intensify our activism aimed at ending racism domestically and imperialist militarism around the world. These two imperatives merge when we look at the

growing militarization of the police in the U.S. and the vast prison industrial complex.

Many of the same weapons and tactics utilized in Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia and Palestine are being unleashed against African Americans and others inside this country. Police kill African Americans and Latinos at an alarming rate and in most cases the authorities go unpunished.

The massive impending evictions by Wayne County due to property tax foreclosures and the renewed water shut-offs of thousands in Detroit indicate clearly that the rebuilding of Detroit is taking place in contravention to the majority of people who live there. We must continue our vocal opposition to these crimes against humanity.

We look forward to our new members of the board of directors. This is a working board that seeks to make a difference in the broader movement for social change in the U.S. and internationally. Let us move forward into the coming year with the necessary vigor and vision that will ensure the fundamental change that is needed in the present period.

*Note: This presentation was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR) which was held on Thurs. June 18, 2015 at the Our Lady of Fatima Church located in Oak Park, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Azikiwe serves as an executive board member of the organization having previously occupied the positions of both chairperson of the board of directors and president during 2007-2014.*

*Also speaking at this event was Dr. Saaed Khan, a professor at Wayne State University and also a member of the MCHR Board of Directors.*

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