

War, Racism and the Empire of Poverty

When Empire Hits Home, Part 1

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At a time of such great international turmoil economically and politically, it is increasingly important to identify and understand the social dynamics of crisis. A global social crisis has long preceded the economic crisis, and has only been exacerbated by it. The great shame of human civilization is the fact that over half of it lives in abysmal poverty.

Poverty is not simply a matter of 'bad luck'; it is a result of socio-political-economic factors that allow for very few people in the world to control so much wealth and so many resources, while so many are left with so little. The capitalist world system was built upon war, race, and empire. Malcolm X once declared, "You can't have capitalism without racism."

The global political economy is a system that enriches the very few at the expense of the vast majority. This exploitation is organized through imperialism, war, and the social construction of race. It is vitally important to address the relationship between war, poverty and race in the context of the current global economic crisis. Western nations have plundered the rest of the world for centuries, and now the great empire is hitting home. What is done abroad comes home to roost.

The Social Construction of 'Race'

500 years ago, the world was going through massive transformations, as the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British colonized the 'New World' and in time, a new system of 'Capitalism' and 'nation states' began to emerge. The world was in a great period of transition and systemic change in which it was the Europeans that emerged as the dominant world powers. The colonies in the Americas required a massive labour force, "Between 1607 and 1783, more than 350,000 'white' bond-labourers arrived in the British colonies." [1]

The Americas had both un-free blacks and whites, with blacks being a minority, yet they "exercised basic rights in law." [2] Problems arrived in the form of elites trying to control the labour class. Slaves were made up of Indian, black and white labourers; yet, problems arose with this "mixed" population of un-free labour. The problem with Indian labourers was that they knew the land and could escape to "undiscovered" territory, and enslavement would often instigate rebellions and war:

The social costs of trying to discipline un-free native labour had proved too high. Natives would eventually be genocidally eliminated, once population settlement and military power made victory more or less certain; for the time being, however, different sources of bond labour had to be found. [3]

Between 1607 and 1682, more than 90,000 European immigrants, “three-quarters of them chattel bond-labourers, were brought to Virginia and Maryland.” Following the “establishment of the Royal African Company in 1672, a steady supply of African slaves was secured.” Problems became paramount, however, as the lower classes tended to be very rebellious, which consisted of “an amalgam of indentured servants and slaves, of poor whites and blacks, of landless freemen and debtors.” The lower classes were united in opposition to the elites oppressing them, regardless of background.[4]

Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676 was of particular note, as bond-labourers, black and white, rebelled against the local elites and “demanded freedom from chattel servitude.” For the colonialists, “Such images of a joint uprising of black and white, slave and bondsman, proved traumatic. In the face of a united rebellion of the lower orders, the planter bourgeoisie understood that their entire system of colonial exploitation and privilege was at risk.”[5]

In response to this threat, the landed elite “relaxed the servitude of white labourers, intensified the bonds of black slavery, and introduced a new regime of racial oppression. In doing so, they effectively created the white race – and with it white supremacy.”[6] Thus, “the conditions of white and black servants began to diverge considerably after 1660.” Following this, legislation would separate white and black slavery, prevent “mixed” marriages, and seek to prevent the procreation of “mixed-race” children. Whereas before 1660, many black slaves were not indentured for life, this changed as colonial law increasingly “imposed lifetime bondage for black servants – and, especially significant, the curse of lifetime servitude for their offspring.”[7]

A central feature of the social construction of this racial divide was “the denial of the right to vote,” as most Anglo-American colonies previously allowed free blacks to vote, but this slowly changed throughout the colonies. The ruling class of America was essentially “inventing race.” Thus, “Freedom was increasingly identified with race, not class.”[8]

It is out of this that ideas of race and later, ‘race science’ emerged, as eugenics became the dominant ideology of western elites, trying to scientifically ‘prove’ the superiority of ‘whites’ and the ‘inferiority’ of ‘blacks’. This would carry a dual nature of justifying white domination, as well as providing both a justification for and excuse to oppress black people, and in fact, people of all ‘races’. This was especially clear as in the late 1800s and early 1900s the European empires undertook the ‘Scramble for Africa’ in which they colonized the entire continent (save Ethiopia). It was largely justified as a ‘civilizing’ mission; yet, it was fundamentally about gaining access to Africa’s vast resources.

Following World War II, global power rested predominantly in America, the leading hegemon, expanding the economic interests of North America and Western Europe around the world. War, empire, and racism have been central features of this expansion. In large part, poverty has been the result. Now, the empire hits home.

Global Labour

The world has almost 6.8 billion people, half of them female. The world economy has a labour force of 3.184 billion people; of all people employed in the world, 40% are women. While the world is equally male and female, 1.8 billion men are employed, compared to 1.2 billion women. The population of people in low paying jobs, long hours, and part-time work are predominantly women.[9]

Global Poverty and Wealth

In 1999, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reported that, “Although 200 million people saw their incomes fall between 1965 and 1980, more than 1 billion people experienced a drop from 1980 to 1993.” In 1996, “100 countries were worse off than 15 years [prior].” In the late 1960s, “the people in well-to-do countries were 30 times better off than those in countries where the poorest 20 percent of the world’s people live. By 1998, this gap had widened to 82 times (up from 61 times since 1996).” As of 1998, “3 billion people live on less than \$2 per day while 1.3 billion get by on less than \$1 per day. Seventy percent of those living on less than \$1 per day are women.”[10]

Elites and academics, as well as major social movements in western nations focus on population growth as being the driver in global poverty, picking up from where the Malthusians left off; poverty becomes the problem caused by “population growth” as opposed to a problem caused by wealth and resource distribution. In 2003, a World Bank report revealed that, “A minority of the world’s population (17%) consume most of the world’s resources (80%), leaving almost 5 billion people to live on the remaining 20%. As a result, billions of people are living without the very basic necessities of life – food, water, housing and sanitation.” Further:

1.2 billion (20%) of the world population now lives on less than \$1/day, another 1.8 billion (30%) lives on less than \$2/day, 800 million go to bed hungry every day, and 30,000 – 60,000 die each day from hunger alone. The story is the same, when it comes to other necessities like water, housing, education etc. On the flip side, we have increasing accumulation of wealth and power, where the world’s 500 or so billionaires have assets of 1.9 trillion dollars, a sum greater than the income of the poorest 170 countries in the world.[11]

Other figures from the World Bank report include the fact that, “The world’s 358 billionaires have assets exceeding the combined annual incomes of countries with 45 percent of the world’s people,” and “The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the poorest 48 nations (i.e. a quarter of the world’s countries) is less than the wealth of the world’s three richest people combined.” Incredibly, “A few hundred millionaires now own as much wealth as the world’s poorest 2.5 billion people.”[12]

In regards to poverty and hunger statistics, “Over 840 million people in the world are malnourished—799 million of them are from the developing world. Sadly, more than 153 million of them are under the age of 5 (half the entire US population).” Further, “Every day, 34,000 children under five die of hunger or other hunger-related diseases. This results in 6 million deaths a year.” That amounts to a “Hunger Holocaust” that takes place every single year. As of 2003, “Of 6.2 billion living today, 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 per day. Nearly 3 billion people live on less than \$2 a day.”[13]

In 2005, according to World Bank statistics, “More than one-half of the world’s people live below the internationally defined poverty line of less than U.S. \$2 a day,” and “Nearly one-third of rural residents worldwide lack access to safe drinking water.”[14]

In 2006, a groundbreaking and comprehensive report released by the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University (UNU-WIDER) reported that, “The richest 2% of adults in the world own more than half of global household wealth.” An incredible startling statistic was that:

[T]he richest 1% of adults alone owned 40% of global assets in the year 2000, and that the richest 10% of adults accounted for 85% of the world total. In contrast, the bottom half of the world adult population owned barely 1% of global wealth.[15]

This is worth repeating: the top 1% owns 40% of global assets; the top 10% owns 85% of world assets; and the bottom 50% owns 1% of global assets.

The 2009 UN Millennium Development Goals report stated that in the wake of the global economic crisis and the global food crisis that preceded and continued through the economic crisis, progress towards the goals of poverty reduction are “threatened by sluggish – or even negative – economic growth, diminished resources, fewer trade opportunities for the developing countries, and possible reductions in aid flows from donor nations.”[16]

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) report stated that in 2009, “an estimated 55 million to 90 million more people will be living in extreme poverty than anticipated before the crisis.” Further, “the encouraging trend in the eradication of hunger since the early 1990s was reversed in 2008, largely due to higher food prices.” Hunger in developing regions has risen to 17% in 2008, and “children bear the brunt of the burden.”[17]

In April of 2009, a major global charity, Oxfam, reported that a couple trillion dollars given to bail out banks could have been enough “to end global extreme poverty for 50 years.”[18] In September of 2009, Oxfam reported that the economic crisis “is forcing 100 people-a-minute into poverty.” Oxfam stated that, “Developing countries across the globe are struggling to respond to the global recession that continues to slash incomes, destroy jobs and has helped push the total number of hungry people in the world above 1 billion.”[19]

The financial crisis has hit the ‘developing’ world much harder than the western developed nations of the world. The UN reported in March of 2009 that, “Reduced growth in 2009 will cost the 390 million people in sub-Saharan Africa living in extreme poverty around \$18 billion, or \$46 per person,” and “This projected loss represents 20 per cent of the per capita income of Africa’s poor – a figure that dwarfs the losses sustained in the developed world.”[20]

While the world’s richest regions lie in North America, Europe, and Pacific Asia respectively, the vast majority of the rest of the world lives in gross poverty. This disparity is ‘colour-coded’, too; as the top, the world’s wealthy, are white, while the world’s impoverished, the vast majority of the world’s people, are people of colour. This disparity is further polarized when gender is included, as the majority of the wealthy are men, while the majority of the impoverished are women. This disparity of a global scale is carried over to a national scale in the United States.

Race and Poverty in America

In the last months of Martin Luther King’s life, he focused his attention to the struggle against poverty. Today, “Sadly, as far as the country has come regarding civil rights, more Americans live in poverty today than during King’s lifetime. Forty million people, 13% of the population, currently fall below the poverty line.” In 1967, King wrote:

In the treatment of poverty nationally, one fact stands out. There are twice as many white poor as [black] poor in the United States. Therefore I will not dwell on the experiences of

poverty that derive from racial discrimination, but will discuss the poverty that affects white and [black] alike.[21]

Today, “more whites than blacks do still live in poverty, but a higher proportion of minorities fall below the poverty line, including 25% of blacks and 23% of Latinos (compared to 9% of whites). Stable jobs, good housing, comprehensive education and adequate health care are still unequal, unsuitable and, in many cases, unavailable.” King wrote, “The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty.”[22]

In 1995, “Federal Reserve research found that the wealth of the top one percent of Americans is greater than that of the bottom 95 percent.” Further, “Wealth projections through 1997 suggest that 86 percent of stock market gains between 1989 and 1997 went to the top ten percent of households while 42 percent went to the most well-to-do one percent.”[23]

Wealth disparity is not colour-blind. As of 1998, “The modest net worth of white families [was] 8 times that of African-Americans and 12 times that of Hispanics. The median financial wealth of African-Americans (net worth less home equity) [was] \$200 (one percent of the \$18,000 for whites) while that of Hispanics [was] zero.” Further, “Household debt as a percentage of personal income rose from 58 percent in 1973 to an estimated 85 percent in 1997.”[24]

In 2000, a major university study revealed that the poor were more likely to be audited by the IRS than the rich.[25] In December of 2009, the Seattle Times ran an article in which they tell the story of Rachel Porcaro, a 32-year-old mother of two boys. She was summoned to the IRS back in 2008 where she was told she was being audited. When she asked why, she was told that, “You made eighteen thousand, and our data show a family of three needs at least thirty-six thousand to get by in Seattle.” Thus, “They thought she must have unreported income. That she was hiding something. Basically they were auditing her for not making enough money.”[26]

The reporter for the Seattle Times wrote that, “An estimated 60,000 people in Seattle live below the poverty line — meaning they make \$11,000 or less for an individual or \$22,000 for a family of four. Does the IRS red-flag them for scrutiny, simply because they’re poor?” He contacted the local IRS office with that question; they “said they couldn’t comment for privacy reasons.” What followed the initial audit was even worse:

She had a yearlong odyssey into the maw of the IRS. After being told she couldn’t survive in Seattle on so little, she was notified her returns for both 2006 and 2007 had been found “deficient.” She owed the government more than \$16,000 — almost an entire year’s pay.

[. . .] Rachel’s returns weren’t all that complicated. At issue, though, was that she and her two sons, ages 10 and 8, were all living at her parents’ house in Rainier Beach (she pays \$400 a month rent). So the IRS concluded she wasn’t providing for her children and therefore couldn’t claim them as dependents.[27]

A family friend who was an accountant determined that the IRS was wrong in its interpretation of the tax law; “He sent in the necessary code citations and hoped that would be the end of it.” But the story wasn’t over; “Instead, the IRS responded by launching an audit of Rachel’s parents.” Rachel said, “We’re surviving as a tribe. It seems like we got

punished for that.”[28]

Taxation is a major issue related to poverty. A major report issued in November of 2009 revealed that the state of “Alabama makes families living in poverty pay higher income taxes than any other state.” Thus, “At the lowest incomes, we have some of the highest taxes in the nation because our system is upside down.”[29]

In November of 2009, stunning statistics were revealed as a true test of poverty in America:

With food stamp use at record highs and climbing every month, a program once scorned as a failed welfare scheme now helps feed one in eight Americans and one in four children.

It has grown so rapidly in places so diverse that it is becoming nearly as ordinary as the groceries it buys. More than 36 million people use inconspicuous plastic cards for staples like milk, bread and cheese, swiping them at counters in blighted cities and in suburbs pocked with foreclosure signs.

Virtually all have incomes near or below the federal poverty line, but their eclectic ranks testify to the range of people struggling with basic needs. They include single mothers and married couples, the newly jobless and the chronically poor, longtime recipients of welfare checks and workers whose reduced hours or slender wages leave pantries bare.[30]

The food stamps program is growing at the pace of 20,000 people per day, as “There are 239 counties in the United States where at least a quarter of the population receives food stamps,” and “In more than 750 counties, the program helps feed one in three blacks. In more than 800 counties, it helps feed one in three children.” Further, “food stamps reach about two-thirds of those eligible” nationwide.[31] Thus, there is potentially 18 million more Americans eligible to use food stamps, which would make the figure soar to 54 million.

In 2008, tent cities started popping up in and around cities all across the United States, as the homeless population rapidly expanded like never before.[32] The Guardian reported in March of 2009 that, “Tent cities reminiscent of the “Hoovervilles” of the Great Depression have been springing up in cities across the United States – from Reno in Nevada to Tampa in Florida – as foreclosures and redundancies force middle-class families from their homes.”[33]

An April 2009 article in the German newspaper Der Spiegel ran a report on the middle class in the US being thrown into poverty, in which the authors wrote, “The financial crisis in the US has triggered a social crisis of historic dimensions. Soup kitchens are suddenly in great demand and tent cities are popping up in the shadow of glistening office towers.” Further:

Poverty as a mass phenomenon is back. About 50 million Americans have no health insurance, and more people are added to their ranks every day. More than [36] million people receive food stamps, and 13 million are unemployed. The homeless population is growing in tandem with a rapid rise in the rate of foreclosures, which were 45 percent higher in March 2009 than they were in the same month of the previous year.

[. . .] The crisis in the lower third of society has turned into an existential threat for some Americans. Many soup kitchens are turning away the hungry, and even hastily constructed new facilities to house the homeless are often inadequate to satisfy the rising demand.

Many private corporations across America are withdrawing their funding for social welfare

projects. Ironically, their generosity is ending just as mass poverty is returning to America.[34]

Crime was also reported to be on the rise at a dramatic rate. One criminologist explained that in the face of more Americans struggling in harsh economic times, “The American dream to them is a nightmare, and the land of opportunity is but a cruel joke.” Statistics were confirming his predictions of a rise in crisis-related crime, as April 2009 was “one of the bloodier months in American criminal history.” A professor of criminology stated, “I’ve never seen such a large number (of killings) over such a short period of time involving so many victims.”[35]

In the midst of the euphoria over a perceived economic recovery, which has yet to “trickle down” to the people, tent cities have not vanished. In late February of 2010, it was reported that, “Just an hour outside of New York City, a thriving tent city gives a home to refugees from the economic downturn.” Many people in poverty “have become so desperate that they have had to move into the woods.” One woman in this forest tent city outside of New York had been living there for two years. She said, “I just went through a divorce. And it was a bad divorce. And I ended up here, homeless in here.”[36]

Rob, a 21-year-old who was laid off when the Great ‘Recession’ began, is the youngest homeless man living in the forest tent city. He said the worst part is the shame, “The embarrassment of walking out of here, the cars see you come by and they know who you are. The shame of walking into town and having people give you dirty looks just for the way you’re forced to live.”[37]

While many more millions are being plunged into poverty, the internal disparities of race, gender, and age still persist. In November of 2009, it was reported that the jobless rate for 16-to-24-year-old black men has reached Great Depression proportions, as 34.5% of young black men were unemployed in October of 2009, “more than three times the rate for the general U.S. population.” Further:

The jobless rate for young black men and women is 30.5 percent. For young blacks — who experts say are more likely to grow up in impoverished racially isolated neighborhoods, attend subpar public schools and experience discrimination — race statistically appears to be a bigger factor in their unemployment than age, income or even education. Lower-income white teens were more likely to find work than upper-income black teens, according to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, and even blacks who graduate from college suffer from joblessness at twice the rate of their white peers.[38]

Another startling statistic in the report was that, “Young black women have an unemployment rate of 26.5 percent, while the rate for all 16-to-24-year-old women is 15.4 percent.” The fact that these are the statistics for young people is especially concerning, as “the consequences can be long-lasting”:

This might be the first generation that does not keep up with its parents’ standard of living. Jobless teens are more likely to be jobless twenty-somethings. Once forced onto the sidelines, they likely will not catch up financially for many years. That is the case even for young people of all ethnic groups who graduate from college.[39]

With poverty, food scarcity increases. While many Americans and people the world over have felt the effects of the recession on their daily meals, the race disparity persists in this

facet as well, as “one in four African-American households struggles to put food on the table on a regular basis, compared with about one in seven households nationally.” Further, “90 percent of African American children will receive food stamp benefits by the time they turn 20.”[40]

In March of 2010, a truly staggering report was released by a major economic research group which concluded that, “Women of all races bring home less income and own fewer assets, on average, than men of the same race, but for single black women the disparities are so overwhelmingly great that even in their prime working years their median wealth amounts to only \$5.” Let’s review that again:

[W]hile single white women in the prime of their working years (ages 36 to 49) have a median wealth of \$42,600 (still only 61 percent of their single white male counterparts), the median wealth for single black women is only \$5.[41]

The research organization analyzed data from the Federal Reserve’s 2007 Survey of Consumer Finances. Wealth, or net worth, in the report, is defined as:

[T]he total of one’s assets — cash in the bank, stocks, bonds and real estate; minus debts — home mortgages, auto loans, credit cards and student loans. The most recent financial data was collected before the economic downturn, so the current numbers likely are worse now than at the time of the study.[42]

The study further revealed that, “For all working-age black women 18 to 64, the financial picture is bleak. Their median household wealth is only \$100. Hispanic women in that age group have a median wealth of \$120.” Black women are more likely to be hit with the responsibility of working and raising children on their own:

In a 2008 study of black women and their money, the ING Foundation found that black women — who frequently manage the assets of their households — financially support friends, family and their houses of worship to a much greater degree than the general population.

They also are more likely to be employed in jobs and industries — such as service occupations — with lower pay and less access to health insurance. And when their working days are done, they rely most heavily on Social Security because they are less likely to have personal savings, retirement accounts or company pensions. Their Social Security benefits are likely to be lower, too, because of their low earnings.[43]

The poor youth of America are also disproportionately subject to racial exacerbations of their social situations. In America, “more than half of all young adult dropouts are jobless. And dropouts are at greater risk of being incarcerated and having poorer physical and mental health than those who graduate.” Again, the racial disparity emerges, as “[p]oor and minority youths are far less likely to graduate from high school than white children.”

An October 2009 report released by the National Center for Education Statistics says 59.8 percent of blacks, 62.2 percent of Hispanics, and 61.2 percent of American Indians graduated from public high school in four years with a regular diploma in the 2006-2007 school year compared to 79.8 percent for whites and 91.2 percent for Asian and Pacific Islanders. Black and Hispanic dropout rates were more than twice those of white youths.[44]

Many youths then venture into crime to survive. It is here where another racial divide rears

its head in a clear example of how Justice is not blind, but sees in technicolour. The incarceration rate, that is, the prison rate of Americans is colour-coded. Black men are incarcerated “at a rate that is over 6 times higher than that for white males.” While black Americans make up 13% of the US population, they make up 40% of the US prison population. Meanwhile, whites make up 66% of the US population, yet only 34% of the prison population. Hispanics make up 15% of the U.S. population, and account for 20% of the prison population.[45]

The poor youth are subject to further insults, as new federally funded drug research revealed a startling and bleak disparity: poor children who are dependent upon Medicaid, a government health program for low-income families, “are given powerful antipsychotic medicines at a rate four times higher than children whose parents have private insurance.” Further, these children, the poor children, “are more likely to receive the drugs for less severe conditions than their middle-class counterparts.” A research team from Rutgers and Columbia posed the question:

Do too many children from poor families receive powerful psychiatric drugs not because they actually need them — but because it is deemed the most efficient and cost-effective way to control problems that may be handled much differently for middle-class children?[46]

The effects are not simply psychological, as “Antipsychotic drugs can also have severe physical side effects, causing drastic weight gain and metabolic changes resulting in lifelong physical problems.” Ultimately, what the research concluded was that, “children with diagnoses of mental or emotional problems in low-income families are more likely to be given drugs than receive family counseling or psychotherapy.”[47]

A study published in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry revealed that, “Children and youth on certain antipsychotic medications are more prone to getting diabetes and becoming fat,” and that, “the medication has significant and worrying side-effects.”[48] In America, the prescribing of anti-psychotic drugs to children rose five-fold between 1995 and 2002 to roughly 2.5 million.[49]

Thus, we have a situation in which the poor are treated in such a way as to dehumanize them altogether; to deprive them not simply of life’s necessities, but to then use them as guinea pigs and to punish them for their poverty. Hubert Humphrey once said, “A society is ultimately judged by how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable members.” How shall our societies be thus judged?

War and Poverty

It is to our own detriment that we fail to see the relationship between war and poverty both on a national and global level. War is the most violent and oppressive tool used by the powerful to control people and resources. The industry of war profits very few at the expense of the majority; it does not simply impoverish the nation that is attacked, but impoverishes the nation that is attacking.

In April of 1967, one year before Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, he delivered a speech entitled, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” This speech is one of King’s lesser known, yet arguably, one of his most important. While reading the text of the speech does it no justice to the words spoken from King’s mouth in his magnanimous manner, they are worth reading all the same. Dr. King declared that, “A time comes when silence is

betrayal. That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.” His words are as significant today as the day they were spoken, and are worth quoting at some length:

Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government’s policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one’s own bosom and in the surrounding world. [. . .]

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: Why are you speaking about war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don’t mix, they say. Aren’t you hurting the cause of your people, they ask? And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live.

[. . .] I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

My third reason moves to an even deeper level of awareness, for it grows out of my experience in the ghettos of the North over the last three years — especially the last three summers. As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But they asked — and rightly so — what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today — my own government. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent.

[. . .] In 1957 a sensitive American official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. During the past ten years we have seen

emerge a pattern of suppression which now has justified the presence of U.S. military “advisors” in Venezuela. This need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counter-revolutionary action of American forces in Guatemala. It tells why American helicopters are being used against guerrillas in Colombia and why American napalm and green beret forces have already been active against rebels in Peru. It is with such activity in mind that the words of the late John F. Kennedy come back to haunt us. Five years ago he said, “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”

Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken — the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment.

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing-oriented” society to a “person-oriented” society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

[. . .] A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

[. . .] The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.[50]

After delivering such a monumental speech against war and empire, King was attacked by the national media; with Life Magazine calling the speech, “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi,” and the Washington Post saying that, “King has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, his people.”[51]

War is inextricably linked to the impoverishment of people around the world and at home. Inherent within the system of war, racial divides and exploitation are further exacerbated.

In the midst of the economic crisis, military recruitment went up, as the newly unemployed seek job security and an education. A Pentagon official said in October of 2008 that, “We do benefit when things look less positive in civil society,” as “185,000 men and women entered active-duty military service, the highest number since 2003, according to Pentagon statistics. Another 140,000 signed up for duty in the National Guard and reserve.”[52]

In November of 2008, the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) reported that recruitment into the military had increased by over 14% as a result of the economic crisis. Interestingly, “The north of England, where the credit crunch has hit hard, is among the areas where the MoD says recruitment is at its strongest.”[53]

In 2005, it was reported that the Pentagon had developed a database of teenagers 16-18 and all college students “to help the military identify potential recruits in a time of dwindling enlistment.” Further, according to the Washington Post, “The new database will include personal information including birth dates, Social Security numbers, e-mail addresses, grade-point averages, ethnicity and what subjects the students are studying.”[54]

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released a report in 2008, which revealed that there is a dangerous trend in recruiting youth in the United States. Recruitment of youth 16

and younger is prohibited in the United States, however:

[T]he U.S. armed services regularly target children under 17 for military recruitment. The U.S. military heavily recruits on high school campuses, targeting students for recruitment as early as possible and generally without limits on the age of students they contact. Despite a lawsuit challenging its identification of eleventh-grade high school students for recruitment, the Department of Defense's central recruitment database continues to collect information on 16-year-olds for recruitment purposes.[55]

Various Army programs and recruitment services target students as young as 11, which includes a video game used as a tool for Army recruitment "explicitly marketed to children as young as 13." Further, "The U.S. military's recruitment policies, practices, and strategies explicitly target students under 17 for recruitment activities on high school campuses." [56]

In 2007, prior to the economic crisis, it was reported that, "nearly three quarters of those killed in Iraq came from towns where the per capita income was below the national average." Further, "More than half came from towns where the percentage of people living in poverty topped the national average." The war casualties have disproportionately affected rural American towns, which make up the majority of military recruits. Interestingly, between "1997 to 2003, 1.5 million rural workers lost their jobs due to changes in industries like manufacturing that have traditionally employed rural workers." [57] Now, they make up the majority of war casualties. War and poverty are inherently related in this example: the most impoverished suffer the most in war.

In 2007, it was further reported that more than 30,000 foreign troops are enlisted in the US Army, being recruited to join from foreign nations such as Mexico in return for being granted US citizenship.[58] In 2005, whites made up 80% of Army recruits, while blacks made up 15% of recruits. In 2008, whites made up 79%, while blacks made up 16.5% of Army recruits. However, an interesting statistic is that between 2007 and 2008, there was a 5% increase in the recruit of whites, while over the same period there was nearly a 96% increase in the recruitment of blacks. In 2008, 52% of recruits were under the age of 21. For the fifth year in a row, as of 2008, "youth from low- to middle-income neighborhoods are over-represented among new Army recruits." [59]

In March of 2008, The Nation published an article entitled "The War and the Working Class," in which it explained that the American military operated under an "economic draft," as "Members of the armed forces come mainly and disproportionately from the working class and from small-town and rural America, where opportunities are hard to come by." [60] This was even before the economic crisis had really started to be noticed in the United States.

In January of 2009 it was reported that, "The Army and each of the other branches of the military are meeting or exceeding their goals for signing up recruits, and attracting more qualified people." [61] In March of 2009, it was reported that, "Fresh recruits keep pouring into the U.S. military, as concerns about serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are eclipsed by the terrible civilian job market." All branches of the armed forces "met or exceeded their active duty recruiting goals for January, continuing a trend that began with a decline in the U.S. job market."

The military acknowledged that weakness in the U.S. economy, which lost 2.6 million jobs in 2008 and another 598,000 in January, has made the armed services more appealing to potential recruits.[62]

It was reported in October of 2009 that due to the economic crisis, “Middle-class American youth are entering the military in significant numbers,” as the Department of Defense announced “that for the first time since the draft ended and the all-volunteer force began 36 years ago, every service branch and reserve component met or exceeded its recruiting goals, both in numbers and quality.” As the economic crisis “resulted in the largest and the swiftest increase in overall unemployment that we’ve ever experienced,” this created a boom for military recruiting.[63]

In December of 2009 it was reported that with a record number of college graduates unable to find work, recruitment soared to record levels, even in the midst of President Obama announcing the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. As one commentator put it:

The United States is broken – school systems are deteriorating, the economy is in shambles, homelessness and poverty rates are expanding – yet we’re nation-building in Afghanistan, sending economically distressed young people over there by the tens of thousands at an annual cost of a million dollars each.[64]

In January of 2010 it was reported by the military that many Marines nearing the end of their active duty are reconsidering re-enlisting due to the severe economic situation. According to the U.S. Department of Labor in November of 2009, there were 15.4 million unemployed people in the United States, with the unemployment rate hitting 10%. “Employment fell in construction, manufacturing and information industries, while jobs in temporary help services and health care increased.” Thus, the unemployment figures are somewhat deceiving, as it doesn’t take into account all the people that only rely upon part-time jobs, as “People working part-time jobs for economic reasons numbered 9.2 million. These individuals worked part-time because their hours at another job had been cut back or they were unable to find a full-time job.” Hence, “Marines reenlist for numerous economic reasons.”[65]

In 2007, Obama campaigned on a promise to increase defense spending, and that he wanted the American military to “stay on the offense, from Djibouti to Kandahar,” from Africa to Afghanistan. Obama proclaimed his belief that “the ability to put boots on the ground will be critical in eliminating the shadowy terrorist networks we now face,” and he said that, “no president should ever hesitate to use force — unilaterally if necessary,” not simply to “protect ourselves,” but also to protect America’s “vital interests.”[66]

Sure enough, Obama followed through on those promises. Obama increased defense spending from the previous year. Alone, the United States spends almost as much on its military as the rest of the world combined, including seven times the amount as the next largest defense spender, China.[67]

In October of 2009, Obama signed the largest-ever bill for military spending, amounting to \$680 billion. At the same time, he authorized a spending bill of \$44 billion for the Department of Homeland Security. A sad irony was that, “Obama signed the record Pentagon budget less than three weeks after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.”[68]

In February of 2010, Obama asked Congress to approve a new record-setting defense budget, at \$708 billion.[69] Interestingly, “the Pentagon budget increased for every year of the first decade of the 21st century, an unprecedented run that didn’t even happen in the World War II era, much less during Korea or Vietnam.” Further, “if the government’s current

plans are carried out, there will be yearly increases in military spending for at least another decade.”[70]

As Eric Margolis wrote in February of 2010:

Obama’s total military budget is nearly \$1 trillion. This includes Pentagon spending of \$880 billion. Add secret black programs (about \$70 billion); military aid to foreign nations like Egypt, Israel and Pakistan; 225,000 military “contractors” (mercenaries and workers); and veterans’ costs. Add \$75 billion (nearly four times Canada’s total defence budget) for 16 intelligence agencies with 200,000 employees.

[. . .] China and Russia combined spend only a paltry 10% of what the U.S. spends on defence.

There are 750 U.S. military bases in 50 nations and 255,000 service members stationed abroad, 116,000 in Europe, nearly 100,000 in Japan and South Korea.

Military spending gobbles up 19% of federal spending and at least 44% of tax revenues. During the Bush administration, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars — funded by borrowing — cost each American family more than \$25,000.

Like Bush, Obama is paying for America’s wars through supplemental authorizations — putting them on the nation’s already maxed-out credit card. Future generations will be stuck with the bill.[71]

Thus, the American Empire is in decline, spending itself into utter debt and is at the point of “imperial overreach.” As Eric Margolis wrote, “If Obama really were serious about restoring America’s economic health, he would demand military spending be slashed, quickly end the Iraq and Afghan wars and break up the nation’s giant Frankenbanks.”[72]

So, while people at home are on food stamps, welfare, living in tent cities, going to soup kitchens, getting by on debt, and losing their jobs; America sends forces abroad, conducting multiple wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, expanding the war into Pakistan, funding military operations in Yemen, Somalia, Uganda, building massive new military bases in Pakistan and Colombia and providing military aid to governments around the world. As the empire expands, the people become more impoverished.

We cannot afford to ignore the relationship between war, poverty and race. The poor are made to fight the poor; both are often disproportionately people of colour. Yet war enriches the upper class, at least powerful sects of it in industry, the military, oil and banking. In a war economy, death is good for business, poverty is good for society, and power is good for politics. Western nations, particularly the United States, spend hundreds of billions of dollars a year to murder innocent people in far-away impoverished nations, while the people at home suffer the disparities of poverty, class, gender and racial divides. We are told we fight to “spread freedom” and “democracy” around the world; yet, our freedoms and democracy erode and vanish at home. You cannot spread what you do not have. As George Orwell once wrote:

The war is not meant to be won, it is meant to be continuous. Hierarchical society is only possible on the basis of poverty and ignorance. This new version is the past and no different past can ever have existed. In principle the war effort is always planned to keep society on the brink of starvation. The war is waged by the ruling group against its own subjects and its

object is not the victory over either Eurasia or East Asia, but to keep the very structure of society intact.

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