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The Gothic Underside of U.S. Imperialism

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Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.
For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and daughter against her
mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be
they of his own household.

- Matthew 10: 34-36

The 40-year commemoration of the inauguration of U.S. overt military intervention in Vietnam, coinciding as it has with the past year's U.S. military invasion and occupation of Iraq, dredges up all the false promises and banal laments of lost U.S. innocence that have emerged in its many wars of aggression in the past two centuries. In both the press and last year's presidential election, arguments for and against the comparison of the Iraq quagmire with the Vietnam war have raged, even as military leaders have hastened to review the hard lessons learned by the U.S. on guerrilla warfare and the insurmountable failure to win the "hearts and minds" of the people they butchered and showered with napalm. A number of astute observers have traced the comparison of wars and post-war reconstruction efforts to even earlier wars, most notably the Philippine-American war (1899-1902 [1916]) and the Pacific war against the Japanese (1941-1945). Indeed, turning the pages of Frederick Jackson Turner's nineteenth century treatise on constant expansion of America's western frontier as the very foundation of U.S. society and culture, one would have to concur with William Appleman Williams' argument that, from the very beginning, "empire" has constituted America's "way of life." In imperial fashion, the question of national security, national resources (particularly U.S. access to oil) and the preservation of civil liberties has come to be framed almost

exclusively by the wars America is forced to conduct "outside" its borders; and in imperial fashion, these wars are increasingly portrayed as supranational *police* actions against rogue states, axes of evil, and whole criminal populations.

In any case, one need not go too far into the history of either war to see how the current president's declaration of a "war on terror" revisits the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, insofar as both effectively blur the international character of war-making (which only the U.S. Congress is authorized to do), with questions of domestic security (Article I, section 8). The effect in both has been to subordinate the protocols of declaring war to the discretion and interpretation of the executive power. Many historians of U.S. imperialism can trace this development back to the Philippine-American war and its aftermath, when Congress was bullied into taking responsibility for the fact that hostilities between U.S. and Filipino revolutionary troops had already begun on soil that the U.S. had "officially" bought from Spain under the Treaty of Paris in 1898. Refusing to acknowledge a national revolution underway, the U.S. declared a "formal" end to hostilities in 1902, after which battles between the U.S. and Philippine resistance continued all the way to 1916 under the terms of "sedition," "insurgency," and "banditry."

Yet a quick look at the U.S. during the period of its first imperialist ventures overseas shows something curious going on. At the same time that the U.S. had begun to mask its wars of aggression in the language of preserving civil order, we also saw the escalation of a discourse of *civil* and *race war* that, since the end of the nineteenth century, has never ceased to question the very existence of a U.S. republic and the legitimacy of its leadership. In 1898, the subject of war filled newspaper headlines and

sparked heated debates the floor of Congress. But an inattentive listener might have missed the fact that publishers, editors, and congressional representatives were not talking about one war, but two. There was the Spanish-American War, which began in February with the sinking of the U.S. battleship Maine in the Havana harbor and the U.S. declaration of war. And there were the public pronouncements of a race war between blacks and whites, with allegations ranging from a black campaign to "colonize and control North Carolina" in October, to public hysteria among whites around the imagined rape of white women by black men. According to the *Cleveland Gazette*, between 1882 and 1903 "There were 3,233 lynchings, in one form or another, in this country."¹ The year 1901, which marked the height of U.S. atrocities in our takeover of the Philippines, and what might legitimately be identified as genocidal campaigns in various provinces of Luzon, also coincided with the escalation of black lynchings to 105 reported cases at home. On the floor of the 56th U.S. Congress (1900), Senator Ben "Pitchfork" Tillman of South Carolina summarized his war against "black domination": "We have done our level best; we have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it" (Katz, in *The Black Press Views American Imperialism*, ix). Responding to a newspaper article in which the journalist (who was black) warned that the further oppression of blacks would lead "the negro [to] resort to the sword and torch," Senator Tillman anticipated the day that black resistance to white supremacy would bring about "the massacre of the negroes and to a race war which would have only one result, the destruction of the weaker race" (Kantrowitz, 261).

Not one war, but two. Or are the two one, does some continuity bind them together? The gothic underside of U.S. imperialism that returns us ever again to the Civil War has never failed to rear its head in our past and present wars of aggression, to the point that it often becomes difficult to tell the two apart. According to the Stuart Creighton Miller, from the beginning of the Philippine-American war, "the most common assertion of the volunteers in the months preceding the war was that they were 'just itching to get at the niggers'" (Miller, 176). This racialization would be explicable to the fundamental ignorance of U.S. soldiers regarding the appearance of anyone from the Philippines, but the rhetoric doesn't disappear and in fact seems to only increase during the outbreak of hostilities: "You have niggers you can't see shoot at you until you get close enough to shoot at them and then Mr. Nigger tears off...", says one (177); any soldier showing sympathy for Filipinos was called a "nigger lover"; in describing the actual battle scene, one soldier writes: "our fighting blood was up, and we all wanted to kill 'niggers'.... We charged them and such a slaughter you never saw" (188). In fact, the racial conflation of Filipinos as blacks culminates on the floor of the 56th Congress, where Senator Thornton delivers a proposal to deport blacks to the Philippines after the archipelago has been subdued. This fiction shows how the state of emergency went beyond the racialization of blacks as Filipinos, but actually sought to *turn blacks into Filipinos*.

When one telescopes forward to the tumultuous years of the Freedom Movement of the 1950s and 60s, we find a similar confusion between domestic descriptions of civil and racial unrest (riot, lynching, sedition, fanaticism, terrorism) and the international

language of natural rights, anti-colonial revolution, and war -- race war, class war, the war of the sexes. The 1963 march on Washington, the escalation of riots in cities as diverse as Oxford, MS (1962), Cambridge, MA (1963), Harlem, NY, Philadelphia, PA (1964) and Watts, CA (1965) -- all during the years coinciding with the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam -- also corresponded to both the growth of nonviolent protest and the rise of black radicalism. The figure of Malcolm X perhaps most starkly emblemizes the dangerous links forged in the cauldron of the inner cities of the early 60s, between the liberation of blacks in the decolonization movements of Africa and Asia, and the onset of a Black Revolution in America. A year before U.S. President Lyndon Johnson signed the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution, arrogating to the executive branch of government the power to make war without declaring it, Malcolm X traveled to the urban ghettos of the East and Midwest, insisting that the enemy was not Vietnam. "If violence is wrong in America then violence is wrong abroad. If it's wrong to be violent, defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it is wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us and teach us how to be violent in defense of her then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country" ("Message to the Grass Roots," 1963). His radical solution, beyond his opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam, was the need for all colored peoples in the world as well as the U.S., to recognize that we all really had only *one* enemy in common -- "the white man. He's an enemy to all of us." Two years later, Malcolm X was assassinated. Dr. Martin Luther King, who began to wonder aloud in 1967 whether it was possible to advocate for peace at home without also advocating for peace abroad, also undertook the

dangerous task of connecting the violence of racial discrimination with the violence of U.S. wars in Asia.² The following year a trained sniper shot him, setting off riots in over 100 cities in America.

I will conclude this reflection with two brief observations, which address not only the ghosts of Vietnam and the Philippines in our war against innocent Iraqi women, children, and men today, but also the present struggle against the rollback of basic and civil rights, as well as public programs under the current administration.

1. *The domestication of the military and the paramilitarism of the police.* The discourse of race and civil war emerges as the gothic underside to the blurring of distinctions between the exercise of state violence "at home" and abroad. From the Philippine-American war, to Vietnam and now Iraq, the arrogation of war powers by the executive branch of U.S. government in the name of national security has rendered the domestic "state of exception" indistinguishable from an international state of war. The militarization of police in SWAT teams, combined with the FBI and CIA's general disregard for the respect of civil liberties and due process of law during the years of the Vietnam war, ultimately succeeded in disciplining the immediate consequences of grassroots activism that found its unity and solidarity in the anti-war movement. One does not need to stretch the imagination to see the Patriot Act I and the suppressed plans for a Patriot Act II as a part of this genealogy. To the degree that today's "war on terror" creatively confuses the police function with the military; to the degree that the idea of preserving "international peace" entails the identification of the domestic criminal as *an international enemy with the question of life and death at stake*, the discourse of race and

civil war will continue to articulate a condition where, as Walter Benjamin long ago reminded us, "'the state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin, 257).³

2. *Friend and foe*. The strategic advantages of analyzing the history of U.S. imperialism from its gothic underside explain how this type of analysis has proven so widespread and effective in mobilizing grassroots movements of white supremacy as well as black power, Christian as well as Muslim fundamentalisms, socialist revolution as well as democratic "civilization," from the turn of the twentieth century to our present day. And, to be sure, the short-term *appropriation* of this discourse -- the identification of the state of war with the state of exception -- may have yielded the short-term gains of globally expanding the military and prison industrial complexes, as well as accelerating the abandonment of social welfare, which have been priorities of the current administration from the very beginning. Yet the lesson of Vietnam and the social movements for civil rights in the 1960s should give us pause to consider what the long-term effects of living in the state of emergency may be. A divided House and a divided country, a divided Cabinet and a divided people, the escalation of random violence by non-state agents, the endless circulation of shibboleths to determine the sovereign distinction between friend and foe, with the question of life and death at stake: these do not so much hasten an apocalypse to come as they indefinitely prolong the one that is already at hand. In the words of one Cincinnati native whose home was raided by police and who died in a shootout with them just prior to the April, 2001 Cincinnati riot, "You want a war? You got a war!"⁴

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¹ The Tuskegee Institute chronicled over 4,000 lynchings during a similar period.

² In his "Declaration of Independence from Vietnam" speech in 1967, King says: "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.... But, they asked, what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn't using massive doses of violence to solve its problems.... 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."

³ "The job of a police officer," Diane Cecilia Weber writes, "is to keep the peace while adhering to constitutional procedures. Soldiers, on the other hand, consider enemy personnel human targets. Confusing the police function with the military function can lead to dangerous and unintended consequences -- such as unnecessary shootings and killings." See "Warrior Cops: The Ominous Growth of Paramilitarism in American Police Departments," *Cato Institute Briefing Papers*, No. 50 (August 26, 1999).

⁴ Quoted in Barry M. Horstman, "15 black men killed since 1995," *Cincinnati Post* (4-10-01).