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Fuck You, Dying American Empire: Reflections of an Aging Anti-Imperialist

Last year at Jamia Millia Islamia Central University in New Delhi, India I met students and teachers who thought that it was cool that I'd written an anti-imperialist book and that it was still in print nearly fifty years after it was first published. It was easy to be an anti-imperialist at Jamia Millia. After all, the students and the teachers were anti-imperialists and all worked-up about U.S. drones, U.S. air strikes and about the Syrians on the ground who had been battered and bombed.

It was also relatively easy to be an anti-imperialist in the late 1960s and early 1970s when anti-imperialism was a red badge of courage in SDS, the Venceremos Brigade, in anti-war circles and even among the Yippies, who were far more internationalist in their outlook than many on the Left assumed. Once upon a time, Jerry Rubin went to Cuba to check out the revolution, and later to Chile with singer and songwriter, Phil Ochs, to see what Salvador Allende was doing.

But here in the U.S. in 2018, is it still possible to be an authentic anti-imperialist, an anti-imperialist in more than name? I thought about that question recently when a former comrade explained that he was still an anti-imperialist and wondered if I was one, too.

It wasn't the first time that my politics were questioned. In 1980, soon after Reagan was elected president, Professor Edward Said asked me if I was still on the Left and hadn't drifted to the right like that former radical, David Horowitz, whom Alexander Cockburn dismissed as a "whiner." A plain "Yes," or a "No" answer wouldn't do, nor a "Maybe."

Am I now and have I ever been an anti-imperialist? It's really nobody's business but my own!

I don't know anyone in my part of northern California who calls himself or herself an anti-imperialist, though friends and neighbors claim to be against racism, sexism, patriarchy and ageism.

U.S. anti-imperialism has a noble lineage. Mark Twain was an anti-imperialist and so was his friend and fellow writer, William Dean Howells. They both belonged to the American Anti-Imperialist League that was founded in 1898 to oppose the U.S. annexation of the Philippines and whose members included an odd assortment of individuals such as Jane Addams, Josephine Shaw Lowell, Henry James, David Starr Jordan, Grover Cleveland and Andrew Carnegie.

The League, which didn't oppose U.S. entry into World War I, disbanded in 1920 just as U.S. imperialism was flexing its global muscles more than ever before, though from its founding the American republic aimed to go West and become a continental empire.

Then, in the twentieth-century, the nation began to shrink the globe big time, to extract labor from peasants and workers in Asia and Africa and export American light bulbs, American Gatling guns, American lingo—"Kilroy Was Here"—and American movies.

Cultural imperialism always bugged me more than any other aspect of imperialism. I hated to see U.S. cultural commodities supplant indigenous cultures. That sight still rankles me, whether I see it in India, Mexico or the American South West. Every time I see and hear about the survival of ancient myths, legends, dances and music I'm ready to cheer.

Membership in an anti-imperialist league or organization makes sense, but to be an anti-imperialist of one in a sea of California anti-intellectualism and provincialism—"We're number one"—has little or no meaning to me. Why be an anti-imperialist in name only? No, thanks! I don't mean to live off past glory, though it was a thrill to meet students in India who had studied *The Mythology of Imperialism* and who told me it was the first book they'd ever read in which they could hear that the author was angry. That was me! I was pissed.

At 77, it's not possible to be angry with the same intensity that I was angry at 27 when I wrote my anti-imperialist book in-between rioting in the streets, spray painting slogans at Times Square at midnight, going to jail and having the cops kick the shit out of me. I don't know of any other way to be an anti-imperialist except the way I was an anti-imperialist during the War in Vietnam.

Indeed, it's no easy feat to be an old anti-imperialist. Che died at 39, Lenin at 53 and Mark Twain at 74. The author of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, which takes a big swipe at weapons of mass destruction, noted near the end of his life, "I am always on the side of the revolutionists, because there never was a revolution unless there were some oppressive and intolerable conditions against which to revolte." Thanks, Mr. Twain. I'm glad you said that.

Today, there are so many oppressive and intolerable conditions the world over, and so many different imperialisms: the Chinese, the Russian, the India, the Israeli, the Brazilian and the U.S. It was comforting in the 1960s and 1970s to recognize that the American Empire was in decline and that the Soviets, the Vietnamese and the Chinese stood up to the Pentagon. Gratifying, too, that crowds in Paris, Rome, and London denounced the U.S. invasion and occupation of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Now, who stands up to the White House, the Senate, Google, Facebook and Amazon? Precious few citizens! Empires have proliferated and reinvented themselves. The American Empire is still in decline, though as George Lukas noted in 1980 it did "Strike Back" with Reagan, and later with Bush I, Bush II, Clinton and Obama.

An empire in decline—whether Roman, British, or American—isn't a pretty thing. It can take decades to fall apart. I saw that when I lived in England. An Empire in decline isn't really anything to cheer about. Indeed, the fall of empire makes life miserable for migrants, serfs, slaves, refugees, prisoners, pensioners and even for aging anti-imperialists. Maybe it's a cheap shot. I don't care. I'll say it here, "Goodbye and Fuck you, American Empire."