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## **"Sal Si Puedes!" - Barack Obama and an Election for Empire**

**By John Hayakawa Török, Jd, PhD**

**BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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*[Revised from a talk Mr. Török gave at the World Association of International Studies Conference, "Globalities and Localities," October 11, Stanford University]*

How historic was Barack Obama's election as the forty-fourth president of the United States of America? For the Atlantic world Obama's election was a change, as persons of African descent were historically traded, enslaved, and denied the right among others to vote. Under the U.S. law of slavery both revolt and the "Black" family were legally impossible. Free trade and freedom were not then synonymous. But we now have an "African American" first family.

This essay asks if racial integration of the Big House opens up space for thought about world peace, focusing on arms control and U.S. foreign relations. Not long after U.S. colonial independence, Emmanuel Kant wrote that republican states unlike monarchies would not favor war. Then the 100-years Indian and the Mexican wars consolidated the U.S. continental empire. The wars of 1898, 1914-1918, and 1939-45 confirmed America as a world-class military power. Planetary scale American Empire however is a Cold War product. Current force deployment prompts the questions:

1. how are U.S. military facilities abroad justifiable;
2. did the world ask the U.S. to function as its police; and

3. if so, when did the U.S. taxpayer agree to fund the world police?

President Obama's life story provides us a starting point for our analysis. Like most Americans and many presidents, he lacked military experience before becoming commander in chief. For a U.S. citizen he had an uncommonly international childhood: Obama grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii as the child of a foreign student from Kenya and a Kansan mother. His striving Midwestern grandparents and mother, elite private U.S. education in Hawaii, California, New York, and Boston, early achievements securing state and federal office, and two published memoirs make him an attractive symbol for many American and global citizens. And his national campaign clearly prompted hopes for positive change.

The second starting point is the complex of ideas of "national security" created by the U.S. and its allies in the post-1945 world order. Two ideological moments, Nazism and Communism, tied respectively to the national projects of Germany and Soviet Russia, and the conflated "totalitarianisms" of pre-war Japan and Germany, the Soviet Union, and post-1949 revolutionary China, formed the U.S. national security ideology and its attendant institutions.

Today U.S. national security ideology supports a military budget that represents over half of an estimated \$1.5 trillion annual expenditure on arms worldwide. Postwar U.S. national security strategy had two key goals:

1. to ensure that no hostile power would control Eurasia as Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan had; and
2. that foreign natural resources, especially oil, would be available for long term extraction. The latter interest prompted the first Gulf War after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. However, U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia inspired then Saudi national Osama bin Laden to declare war on U.S. influence.

Clearly, the U.S. nation-state defending against military attacks on American workers on U.S. soil whatever their source is entirely justified. The World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks sought to achieve a specific political objective, namely to open up U.S. hegemony to scrutiny. In this they were successful. The late, lamentable Bush administration's policies in response prompted even more domestic and international scrutiny. Which nation recently spent over \$100 billion a year on elective wars without clear political or military objectives?

Terrorism as a tactic, by contrast, is a weapon of the weak. The "global war on terror" policy articulated in 2001 took one possible symptom of disenfranchisement for an ideological and military foe. It may in effect have declared war on the world's poor. We do not yet know if this Bush administration coinage and the underlying policy was the worst blunder in U.S. foreign policy history. But it certainly is in the running. That is, unless the business of America is war.

During the American War in Vietnam compulsory military service for male citizens was abolished. This means the U.S. armed forces now truly are an American People's volunteers. That so few Americans pursue their happiness in the military is some evidence for Kant's thesis that citizens of a republic favor peace. Those Americans who decide on an armed forces career have often chosen to become military professionals

in an all volunteer force.

Whenever the American State does go to war it has to market the war to all of the American people. In the nineteenth century manifest destiny was the philosophy. "Kaiser-ism" was the enemy in World War One. From the 1940s on the government used antifascist and anti-Stalinist rhetoric. In the 1950s it came to include anti-totalitarianism in its advertising; the concept of the totalitarian conflates fascisms and communism. Starting in the late 1980s the marketing rhetoric shifted once again, to anti-terrorism.

So what, then, is to be done? Fifty years after the Indian Wars ended and at the close of the Second World War, the U.S. War Department was renamed the Department of Defense. During the Cold War U.S. intelligence and covert operations capacity were built up. Under President Obama the alliances upon which the American Empire was grounded are being strengthened and new ones developed. Since 2000 the Central Intelligence Agency's term "blowback" has become better known. Malcolm X might have called it "chickens coming home to roost." A 2002 governmental reorganization brought us the Department of Homeland Security. While defense and homeland security are not synonyms, for clarity's sake we ought to rename "Defense" the Department of International Security. This prompts the three questions regarding the U.S. and global security asked earlier in this essay.

It is some fifty years since the startup of Motown and the fall of Fulgencio Batista. Thirty years ago the U.S. normalized relations with the People's Republic of China. The Ayatollah Khomeini called the U.S. the "Great Satan," and Ronald Reagan called the former Soviet Union the "Evil Empire." Twenty years ago the Berlin Wall fell, and Chinese students sang Cui Jian's *Nothing To My Name* as anthem at Tiananmen Square.

The existing global governance structure was established after World War Two primarily by France, Britain, the U.S., the Soviet Union, and China. Cold War multilateral treaties as modified after 1991, like NATO and SEATO, are still in effect. The occupation constitutions of Germany and Japan restrict those countries' military capacity building, which proved a blessing for their postwar export-oriented industrial development. Brazil from the 1960s, China from the 1970s, India, and now Russia have all sought export-oriented industrial development. Naval and air power, including for Germany and Japan, commensurate with their respective shares of world trade could now be appropriate.

The question whether the U.N. Security Council should have any permanent members must arise, given that China, Russia, the U.S., England, and France, are the world's largest arms producers and exporters. The arms traders make slaughter and they call it peace. Moreover, these five have conducted over 99% of all the world's previous nuclear weapons tests. The structural reality that the demilitarization of the U.N. Security Council permanent members' economies cannot but adversely affect them makes arms reduction the challenge for peace in our century.

In the long 20th century, under the Monroe Doctrine and its so-called Roosevelt corollary, "American interests" and "the American way of life" prompted frequent U.S. interventions and occupations in the Americas and in the Caribbean. The core of U.S.

policy was extraction of agricultural and natural resources from the producer countries under terms favorable to U.S. industries and the consumer economy. U.S. support of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, then the first Gulf War, and especially the American war in Iraq from 2003, formalized the expansion of this U.S. foreign policy approach to the Middle East.

Two critical international conferences occurred during the Cold War, one in 1955 at Bandung, Indonesia, and the second in 1966 in Havana, Cuba. Misread, like the decolonization movement of those years, as part of a communist imperialism, they represented in part an effort to move past the capitalist/communist binary by the newly independent nations. These countries sought not to be proxy war sites and thus the major profit centers of the world arms trade.

New Left criticism of American wars and military installations started in the 1950s. Early on New Left critique had responded to the suppression of the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian nationalist revolts of 1956 and 1968. It adopted the liberal critique of state control of dissent. Human and social movement buy-in to the freedom of political speech ideal has increased, even if it is not always supported by states or transnational corporations. Many in the European New Left also supported Third World decolonization movements.

The American New Left in its origin moment opposed the "war machine" built upon the Cold War U.S. foreign relations containment project, and Third World proxy wars with a special focus on Southeast Asia. The American State responded to the civil rights and antiwar movements with political surveillance and domestic covert action. Despite the mass citizen movement against the Vietnam War, U.S. forces' global deployments in Europe and Asia today still reflect containment policy. Were there a unified European military command with adequate capacity, the U.S. could finally withdraw all its troops from Europe, and Asia thereafter.

In the Cold War, New Left critique of U.S. foreign relations focused on Eurasia policy. If now protecting international trade is desired, it would appear regional alliances for trade security for Africa, Asia, and Latin America, under a reformed U.N. with an international military command structure, make sense. Moreover, existing threats to Eurasian security and the present distribution of military power suggest that in the near term far closer U.S. military ties with Russia, Brazil, China, and India make more sense than many present alliances. Ceding the international security function to the United Nations could help the U.S. reduce its global military footprint.

America's founders thought well regulated militias could replace a standing army. The warrior ideal has never commanded majority popular support among Americans under a republican system of governance. Moreover, President Eisenhower in his farewell address warned Americans against the influence of the military-industrial complex. War profits and arms sales still drive too much of the economy. These special interests cannot fool all of the people all of the time. The conditions now facing most U.S. citizens put into serious question whether the global reach of U.S. military power serves the people. Is it not now obvious that *Pax Americana* has bankrupted the country?

In this context, the top challenge for the Obama administration is selling to its domestic

audience and the war-profit oriented U.S. special interests the need to reduce military expenditure to allow increased investment both in the U.N. and domestically in new knowledge and technologies. The debt financing of empire is already an increasing constraint on American power. Putting the expense of international trade security under international organizational control and financing is thus clearly in the national interest.

One definition of the State is that it has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. International organizations, whether public or private, are not states. Should nation-states share their monopoly with a public international organization like the U.N.? The work of Blackwater International on behalf of certain transnational clients has already broken the monopoly for private international organizations. What guarantee is there that Blackwater and its ilk will never for their private clients engage the U.S. armed forces acting in their capacity as unofficial world police? War as private enterprise creates a bad incentive structure: more war means more profits.

Creating an official and international world police may create conditions for fewer wars. Under this new world order, new formations like an Indian Ocean Treaty Organization or a Pacific Ocean Treaty Organization can be imagined. They could police the stealing from the rich to give to the poor that piracy in international waters, especially off Somalia and near the Philippines, present. Only 12% of the world's population owns a car. Currently existing capitalism in much of the overdeveloped world has supported increased car ownership with state subsidies. Both piracy and terrorism may be seen the car-jacking problems of the 21st century. The response required, clearly, is international diplomacy and policing rather than war. Unless there is a more egalitarian global distribution of wealth, however, ensuring the safety of the rich from the global poor will be the "good buy" investment of the coming decades.

Increasing privatization of formerly state functions, such as armed force, detention and security, do provide mercenary army and incarceration companies great growth opportunities. The U.S. government "rescue" of the U.S. and global financial system represents history's largest transfer payment from the citizenry of a republic to the wealthy. Government transfer payments to the global (including the U.S.) rich suggest that Cui Jian's anthem, *Nothing to My Name*, is increasingly descriptive. The people's impoverishment pays for the U.S. banker's bonuses, the private insurance industry's profits, and the military's wealth of bombs.

The U.S. favors an approach to war-fighting, aerial bombing, called terror by those upon whom it was inflicted in the past. In the Spanish Civil War one thinks of the attack that prompted Picasso's *Guernica*. In the U.S.-Indian wars, and during the scramble for Africa, such bombing did not yet exist. London burned under German bombs in World War Two. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, as well as the carpet bombing of German cities and Tokyo, were calculated to terrorize. Bombing is never humanitarian notwithstanding a late 20th century NATO claim to the contrary. As the American Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan are prosecuted this history ought to be remembered. *Sal si puedes!* But there is nowhere to run.

Greater international understanding and cooperation are still needed. Internationalizing the U.S. Peace Corps model by creating multinational teams of volunteer youth would promote both better mutual understanding and could aid in disaster relief or complete local economic development projects where needed. Imagine Rwandan, Afghan,

Cambodian, Laotian, Iraqi, Sudanese, Burmese, and former Yugoslavian young people working together with American youth to help rebuild in post-Katrina New Orleans. Expanded international education exchanges, bringing more students like Barack Obama, Junior's father to the overdeveloped world for study and training, will further advance international understanding. These initiatives should move us all closer to Kant's aspiration of perpetual peace. In this still new century, let us start to think of war itself as a crime against humanity. As the late, great Anglo-American philosopher John Lennon put it: "All we are saying is give peace a chance." ©

**BlackCommentator.com** Guest Commentator, John Hayakawa Török, is a critical race theorist and card-carrying member of the USA Green Party, who lives in Oakland, California. He is a Fellow, World Association of International Studies, Stanford University. Click [here](#) to contact John Török.



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