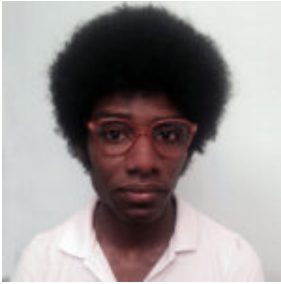


# People Worldwide Name US As A Major Threat To World Peace. Here's Why.



*Khury Petersen-Smith Photo: ips-dc.org*

How is it that people across the globe have come to agree that the United States is now [one of the primary threats to world peace and democracy?](#)

Having leveled two Japanese cities with atomic bombs and established itself as the world's top superpower following the collapse of the international order in the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. quickly became intoxicated by its newfound military superiority.

The U.S. soon went on to introduce a doctrine that positioned itself as the world's police, drop more bombs in the Korean and Vietnamese wars than there had been dropped in the whole course of World War II, and orchestrate military coups against democratically elected governments throughout Latin America. It ended up in turn supporting brutal dictatorships and establishing more foreign military bases than any other nation or empire in history all over the globe.

All this occurred within the first 30 or so years after the end of World War II. By the time the 21st century came around, the U.S. was the only military and economic superpower in the world. Yet, that did not put an end to U.S. imperial ambitions. A "global war on terrorism" was initiated in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with the U.S. ending up by 2013 being seen by people around the world as "[the greatest threat to world peace.](#)"

What are the roots of U.S. imperialism? What has been the impact of imperial expansion and wars on democracy at home? Is the U.S. empire in retreat? In this interview, scholar and activist Khury Petersen-Smith, who is Michael Ratner Middle East Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, discusses how U.S. imperialism has undermined democracy, both home and abroad, with the wars abroad even being tied to police brutality at home.

*C.J. Polychroniou: The U.S. has a long history of war-on-terror campaigns going all the way back to the spread of anarchism in late 19th century. During the Cold War era, communists were routinely labelled as “terrorists,” and the first systematic war on terror unfolded during the Reagan administration. Following the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration renewed the war on terror by implementing a series of far-reaching policy initiatives, many of which, incidentally, went unnoticed by the public but also continued during the Obama and Trump administrations, respectively, which subverted democracy and the rule of law. Can you elaborate about the impact of war-on-terror policies in the dismantling of U.S. democracy?*

*Khury Petersen-Smith: It’s true: The tactics and beliefs that the U.S. has deployed in the war on terror have deep roots that stretch well before our current time. I would argue that the U.S. has never been a democracy, and that a key reason is its basically permanent state of war, which began with its founding. New England settlers, for example, waged a war of counterinsurgency against Indigenous peoples here who resisted colonization in King Philip’s War. The settlers besieged Indigenous nations, considering communities of adults and children to be “enemies” and punishing them with incredible violence. This was in the 1670s.*

In a different U.S. counterinsurgency, in the Philippines in the early 20th century, American soldiers used “the water cure,” a torture tactic comparable to the “waterboarding” that the U.S. has used in the war on terror. This was one feature of a horrific war of scorched earth that the U.S. waged as Filipino revolutionaries fought for an independent country after Spanish colonization. The U.S. killed tens of thousands of Filipino fighters, and hundreds of thousands — up to a million — civilians. There was also a staggering amount of death due to secondary violence, such as starvation and cholera outbreaks, and due to the U.S. declaration that civilians were fair game to target (as seen in the infamous Balangiga Massacre). It was during that episode in 1901 on the island of Samar, when an American general ordered troops to kill everyone over the age of 10. The designation of

whole populations as the “enemy” — and therefore targets for violence — has echoes that reverberate in Somalia, Yemen, Iraq and other places where the U.S. has fought the war on terror.

This is to say that there are different chapters in the history of U.S. empire, but there is a throughline of justifying military violence and the denial of human rights in defense of U.S. power and “the American way of life.” This history of wars informs those of the present.

In the 20th century, labeling various activities “terrorism” was one way of rationalizing the use of force. The U.S. did this especially with its allies in response to anti-colonial liberation movements. So the South African apartheid regime called anti-apartheid resistance “terrorism,” and the Israeli state did (and continues to do) the same to Palestinian resistance, however nonviolent. The U.S. has armed and defended these states, embracing and promoting the rhetoric of war against “terrorism.”

The flip side of “terrorism” — the blanket enemy against which all violence is justified — is “democracy” — the all-encompassing thing that the U.S. claims to defend in its foreign policy. But again, the 20th century saw the U.S. embrace, arm and wage war with and on behalf of anti-democratic, dictatorial forces on every continent. The decades of violence that the U.S. carried out and supported throughout Latin America in the latter part of the 20th century, in response to waves of popular resistance for social and economic justice, serve as a brutal chapter of examples.

All of these things helped constitute the foundation upon which the Bush administration launched the war on terror.

To answer your question more directly, military violence always requires dehumanization and the denial of rights — and this inevitably corrupts any notions of democracy. War, in fact, always involves an attack on democratic rights at large. When the U.S. launched the war on terror in 2001, the federal government simultaneously waged military campaigns abroad *and* passed legislation like the USA PATRIOT Act, issued legal guidelines and other practices that introduced new levels of surveillance, denial of due process, rationalization of torture and other attacks on civil liberties. These efforts especially targeted Muslims and people of South Asian, Central Asian, Southwest Asian and North

African origin — all of whom were subject to being cast as “terrorists” or “suspected terrorists.”

It is worth noting that while Bush drew upon the deep roots of U.S. violence to launch the war on terror, there has been incredible continuity, escalation and expansion throughout it. Bush launched the drone war, for example, and President Barack Obama then wildly [expanded and escalated it](#). President Donald Trump then [escalated](#) it further.

*Have the war-on-terror policies also affected struggles for racial and migrant justice?*

The war on terror has been devastating for racial and migrant justice. The Islamophobic domestic programs that the U.S. has carried out are racist. And once they were piloted against parts of the population, they could be expanded to others. This is how U.S. state violence works. Indeed, the mass policing, mass incarceration regime built up in the 1990s — which was supposedly directed at “fighting crime,” and the “war on drugs” — targeted Black people and Latinos in particular, building an infrastructure that was then deployed against Muslims and others in the war on terror. With policing vastly expanded in the name of the war on terror, its force came back to Black and Indigenous communities — as it always does in the United States.

It is important to acknowledge the new level of credibility and power that the police attained after 9/11 and in the war on terror. There was actually a powerful wave of anti-racist protest against the police in the 1990s — especially strong in cities like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles. In New York, thousands mobilized to demand justice for Amadou Diallo, Abner Louima, Patrick Dorismond, and others brutalized and killed by the New York City Police Department. The police were on the defensive. They seized upon the post-9/11 moment and the beginning of the war on terror to rehabilitate their image and attain new powers.

With this in mind, I wonder if the current moment of “racial reckoning” unfolding in the U.S. over these two years — brilliant and important as it is — could have actually happened 20 years ago. I think that anti-racist movements were on track to do it, and the war on terror set us back two decades. Consider all of the Black lives lost in that time.

And yes, the war on terror has been catastrophic for migrant justice. One of the early measures was the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, which forced the registration of non-citizens from South and Central Asian, Middle Eastern, and North and East African countries. It was largely unopposed, setting the stage for more racist, targeted policies, like the Muslim ban. Before the war on terror, there was no Department of Homeland Security, no Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The U.S. government seized the opportunity of the war on terror to build on the long history of white supremacy in controlling migration and open a new chapter of border militarization, policing and surveillance of migrants, and deportation.

*The United Nations condemned this past summer, for the 29th year in a row, the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba. Indeed, the U.S. is notorious around the world for violations of international law and has been widely perceived as the greatest threat to world peace. However, the influence of the U.S. in world affairs is sharply in decline and its so-called "soft" power has all but evaporated. Are we living through the death of an empire?*

I'm afraid that U.S. empire is far from death, or even dying.

From the perspective of humanity and the planet, the war on terror has been catastrophic in its levels of destruction and death. But from the perspective of the proponents of U.S. empire, those at its helm, it was a gamble. Bush administration officials were clear from the start that the invasion of Afghanistan was the opening of what they conceived of as a series of invasions and other military operations to demonstrate U.S. hegemony, and punish the minority of states located in the most strategic regions of the world that were not solidly in the American orbit. After invading Afghanistan, Bush declared the "Axis of Evil," targeting Iraq, Iran and North Korea. The U.S. then invaded Iraq, implying that Iran and North Korea could be next. The idea was to project U.S. power and to disrupt and prevent the rise of potential rivals to it.

The U.S. lost the gamble. Not only did untold millions of people around the world suffer from the wars, but the U.S. also failed in its strategic objectives. The regional and world powers whose ascension the U.S. sought to curtail — especially Iran, Russia and China — emerged more powerful, while U.S. power was set back.

But the U.S. remains, far and away, the most powerful country in the world. And it will not surrender that status quietly. On the contrary, even as it continues and supports military operations as part of the war on terror, it is very openly preparing for confrontation with China. It is pursuing a belligerent path that is driving rivalry and militarization — a path toward conflict.

The story of the path the U.S. is pursuing regarding hostility toward China is another that reveals the subterranean, forward motion of empire that continues across presidential administrations. President George W. Bush's [2002 National Security Strategy](#) first signaled that, "We are attentive to the possible renewal of old patterns of great power competition," and identified China as one potential competitor. In 2006, the Bush administration gestured further toward identifying China as posing a problem for U.S. empire, [saying](#), "Our strategy seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities."

When President Obama took office, the U.S. foreign policy establishment had clearly united behind the notion that China was an enemy to be isolated and whose rise was to be curtailed. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [declared](#) "America's Pacific Century" and argued for a winding down of American attention to Iraq and Afghanistan, and a new strategic focus on Asia and the Pacific. Obama launched the "Pivot to Asia," which involved shifting military weapons and personnel to the region and building more facilities there, all aimed at addressing China's ascension. President Trump, of course, brought anti-China hostility to a fever pitch, blaming China for the COVID-19 pandemic, openly using crude, racist language directed at China (but impacting Chinese American people and many other Asian Americans), and opening the door for *Fox News* personalities and officials like Sen. Tom Cotton to talk directly about the supposed "threat" that China poses and call for military action against it. That brings us to today, where there is near consensus between both parties that the U.S. should be gearing up in armed competition with China.

Unfortunately, empires do not simply die. This means that we — around the world, and especially those of us located in the United States — are called upon to resist, undermine and disrupt empire. We need to, across borders, envision a radically different world, and fight for it.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

Source: <https://truthout.org/people-worldwide/>

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