Imperialism has been the most powerful force in world history over the last four or five centuries, carving up whole continents while oppressing indigenous peoples and obliterating entire civilizations. Yet, it is seldom accorded any serious attention by our academics, media commentators, and political leaders. When not ignored outright, the subject of imperialism has been sanitized, so that empires become "commonwealths," and colonies become "territories" or "dominions" (or, as in the case of Puerto Rico, "commonwealths" too). Imperialist military interventions become matters of "national defense," "national security," and maintaining "stability" in one or another region. In this book I want to look at imperialism for what it really is.

Across the Entire Globe

By "imperialism" I mean the process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one nation expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials, and markets of another people.

The preponderant thrust of the European, North American, and Japanese imperial powers has been directed against Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By the nineteenth century, they saw the Third World as not only a source of raw materials and slaves but also a market for manufactured goods. By the twentieth century, the industrial nations were exporting not only goods but also capital, in the form of machinery, technology, investments, and loans. To say that we have entered the stage of capital export and investment is not to imply that the plunder of natural resources has ceased. If anything, the despoliation has accelerated.

Of the various notions about imperialism circulating today in the United States, the dominant view is that it does not exist. Imperialism is not recognized as a legitimate concept, certainly not in regard to the United States. One may speak of "Soviet imperialism" or "nineteenth-century British imperialism" but not of U.S. imperialism. A graduate student in political science at most universities in this country would not be granted the opportunity to research U.S. imperialism, on the grounds that such an undertaking would not be scholarly. While many people
throughout the world charge the United States with being an imperialist power, in this country persons who talk of U.S. imperialism are usually judged to be mouthing ideological blather.

**Myths of Underdevelopment**

We know the impoverished lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the "Third World," to distinguish them from the "First World" of industrialized Europe and North America and the now largely defunct "Second World" of communist states. Third World poverty, called "underdevelopment," is treated by most Western observers as an original historic condition. We are asked to believe that it always existed, that poor countries are poor because their lands have always been infertile or their people unproductive.

In fact, the lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America have long produced great treasures of foods, minerals and other natural resources. That is why the Europeans went through all the trouble to steal and plunder them. One does not go to poor places for self-enrichment. The Third World is rich. Only its people are poor--and it is because of the pillage they have endured.

The process of expropriating the natural resources of the Third World began centuries ago and continues to this day. First, the colonizers extracted gold, silver, furs, silks, and spices, then flax, hemp, timber, molasses, sugar, rum, rubber, tobacco, calico, cocoa, coffee, cotton, copper, coal, palm oil, tin, iron, ivory, ebony, and later on, oil, zinc, manganese, mercury, platinum, cobalt, bauxite, aluminum, and uranium. Not to be overlooked is that most hellish of all expropriations: the abduction of millions of human beings into slave labor.

The enormous wealth extracted should remind us that there originally were few really poor nations. Countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Chile, Bolivia, Zaire, Mexico, Malaysia, and the Philippines were and sometimes still are rich in resources. Some lands have been so thoroughly plundered as to be desolate in all respects. However, most of the Third World is not "underdeveloped" but overexploited. Western colonization and investments have created a lower rather than a higher living standard.
People in these countries do not need to be taught how to farm. They need the land and the implements to farm. They do not need to be taught how to fish. They need the boats and the nets and access to shore frontage, bays, and oceans. They need industrial plants to cease dumping toxic effusions into the waters. They do not need to be convinced that they should use hygienic standards. They do not need a Peace Corps Volunteer to tell them to boil their water, especially when they cannot afford fuel or have no access to firewood. They need the conditions that will allow them to have clean drinking water and clean clothes and homes. They do not need advice about balanced diets from North Americans. They usually know what foods best serve their nutritional requirements. They need to be given back their land and labor so that they might work for themselves and grow food for their own consumption.

Compared to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the European powers carved up the world among themselves, today there is almost no colonial dominion left. Rather than being directly colonized by the imperial power, the weaker countries have been granted the trappings of sovereignty—while Western finance capital retains control of the lion's share of their profitable resources. This relationship has gone under various names: "informal empire," "colonialism without colonies," "neocolonialism," and "neoimperialism."

Historically U.S. capitalist interests have been less interested in acquiring more colonies than in acquiring more wealth, preferring to make off with the treasure of other nations without bothering to own and administer the nations themselves. Under neoimperialism, the flag stays home, while the dollar goes everywhere—frequently assisted by the sword.

We hear that Third World peoples are culturally retarded in their attitudes, customs, and technical abilities. It is a convenient notion embraced by those who want to depict Western investments as a rescue operation designed to help backward peoples help themselves. This myth of "cultural backwardness" goes back to ancient times, when conquerors used it to justify enslaving indigenous peoples. It was used by European colonizers over the last five centuries for the same purpose.