

CUBA, HONDURAS EMPIRE VS

By Tom Keene

With President Obama's visit to Cuba in March (2016), we can consider the issue of political rights in Cuba for the last 50 years. We may contrast that with the issue of human rights in Honduras for the last seven years. In 2009 the Honduran army overthrew the democratically elected government. The United Nations, the Organization of American States and the European Union denounced the coup. The U.S. State Department did not. What followed and still continues is a reign of corruption, persecution, police impunity, dramatic growth in both the crime rate and drug cartels. One consequence felt by us North Americans is the fact of more than 13,000 Honduran children crossing U.S. borders between October 2013 and May 2014.

Presently, with regard to Cuba, President Obama expresses hope of moving beyond the "...conflicted history of American imperialism, Cuban revolution and Cold War isolation..." Eugene Robinson looks forward to "...the day when Cubans are free from the Castro government's suffocating repression."

Reflecting on the contrast of America's hope for Cuba and our indifference to Honduras could bring us to wonder about our own national integrity.

Why such lack of integrity at our national level? Here is why. As Americans we have two heritages, each with different agendas, values and purposes, each in conflict and contradiction with the other. These different heritages are that of a democratic republic on the one hand, and that of empire on the other.

Today we are caught between these two heritages as we explore and test the reasons for having policies that greatly harm ourselves and other people. Our question is which heritage does domination serve? Empire or Republic?

Let's look at our democratic heritage: Our Declaration of Independence.

All humans are created equal.

Each with certain inalienable rights.

Government derives its authority from the consent of the governed.

When governments fail, the governed have the right to abolish these governments and institute new governments.

In other words: People do not get power from the government, the government gets power from the people.

The Constitution's Preamble sets out, in the words of Lincoln, a "government of the people, by the people and for the people," designed to "establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty.

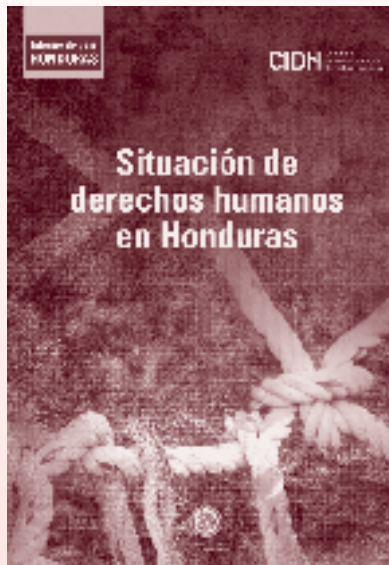
In other words, government is here not to control and use the people but to protect and serve the people. Like our system of free public education to all children. Like the WWII and Korean War GI Bills that provided low interest home loans and college education to millions of GIs whose resulting economic prosperity produced more tax revenue than taxpayers ever spent on GI Bills. A democratic republic invests in its citizens, their liberation and their well being.

Here is what our heritage of empire looks like. By definition, empire invests its resources in domination of its own people as well as other people. American empire tells its subjects that they must pay for the most expensive military in the world but that

we can't afford universal health insurance or publicly funded childcare for working parents.

American empire began with the European domination of Indian lands and people. It built its wealth on slave labor imported from Africa. It conquered and occupied half of Mexico's land, then fought a Civil War over who would control the wealth producing labor in these territories taken from Mexico: the slave holders of the South or the factory owners of the North, who in turn paid their workers slave wages. After the Civil War American empire turned to dominate the Caribbean, taking Puerto Rico and making Cuba an economic satellite. In the Pacific, empire took over Hawaii and the Philippines, calling that ocean an American lake. American empire then fought Filipinos for three years, using concentration camps to quell their fight for independence. Over 200,000, mostly women and children, died in those camps for lack of food and sanitation.

American empire took Panama, built the canal and sent in the Army and Marines to control whoever governed in the Caribbean



IRAS AND US REPUBLIC

and Central America. After WWII, our CIA overthrew democratic governments in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973) when they dared to put control of their natural resources, oil, lands and minerals, in the hands of their people and out of the hands of American corporations. My old army division, the 82nd Airborne, was used to overthrow a democratic movement in the Dominican Republic in 1965. In the 1980s we intervened in Nicaragua and El Salvador to ensure American empire. We invaded Grenada and Panama for the same reason. In all these cases, we violated international law. In 1986, Nicaragua went to the World Court and sued the American empire for its intervention. The World Court found the United States guilty of international terrorism. The U.S. simply declared it did not recognize the authority of the World Court and continued its illegal campaign. Such is empire when it comes to international law.

We can see how different empire is from a Democratic Republic. In an empire the members are thought of as subjects: subjects of the king or emperor, of the government, love it or leave it. Government secrecy is necessary because the people can't be trusted. In a corporately driven empire, its members are thought of as consumers, to have things is to be somebody. Corporations and their CEOs invest in the best government money can buy.

In a democratic republic, its members are thought of as citizens who feel free to question authority, demand freedom of information, who participate in the decisions of government, city, state and federal, through voting and membership in a political party that is not owned by money.

When it comes to war, republics and empires behave differently. A democratic republic distributes political power to all and requires a formal declaration of war from elected representatives of the people. An empire concentrates political power in the hands of the few, and it is the few who make the decisions that lead to war.

American empire invaded Mexico in 1916 to occupy its oil fields with no declaration of war. Wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf, and then the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were fought without formal declaration of war by representatives of the people.

An empire's military will depend on mercenaries and economically stressed volunteers. A republic, when forced to defend itself, can rely on a draft of its own willing citizens.

By its very nature, a democratic republic serves all its constituents equally. Empire, by its nature, serves wealth and power. In a republic, the military serves to protect the nation, the people and the Constitution. In our empire, the military along with CIA covert operations, serves wherever corporate interests require.

So as we reflect on our dual heritage, empire and republic, as we think and talk about our ongoing oppression of other nations, let us consider three questions. Whose forces are making these decisions? The forces of empire or the heritage of our democratic republic? Which forces will benefit from oppression? Empire or Republic? Who will pay the price? Empire or Republic?

How shall we respond to this continuing challenge? We can respond with denial, "Empire is not really that dangerous to us." We can respond with despair and cynicism, "Yes, it really is that bad and we can't do anything about it." We can respond with

hope, as modeled by the people of Esperanza, recognizing that injustice and empire have two offspring: anger at the way things are, and courage to change the way things are. The choice is up to us. We can take on the heavy duties of citizenship or passively conform ourselves to be subjects of empire.

If this struggle for democracy at home seems overwhelming in the face of empire, remember: we are not powerless. We can do something and that something will lead to other things we can do. At the end of our lives we will be responsible, not so much to have succeeded, but to have been faithful to our heritage of a democratic republic, faithful to our consciences and to ourselves.

Bio: Tom Keene was a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division during the Korean War. He has served his community as a community organizer, teacher and buena gente of the Esperanza.

