THE DEMANDS FOR A NEW INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ORDER

PART I

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THE BACKGROUND TO THE DEMANDS

There is a growing consensus emerging within the industrialized West which confirms what the Third World, or developing nations, have been saying for some time: Changing power relationships among nations have rendered many of the old economic structures and institutions obsolete, and that the time has arrived for instituting an entirely new international economic order.

The advent of World War II might well be selected as the historical moment when the old order began its collapse. While the replacement of the British lion and the pound sterling by the brash young Americans and the dollar might well have appeared for a time to have been the most significant outcome of that global confrontation, the richer insight which historical perspective has now provided us makes it clear that the undermining of the old colonial system was in reality the truly significant product of World War II. Indeed, armed with this perspective, one might well be tempted to apply a new cost-benefit analysis to that terrible conflagration with some expectation that the conclusion might be sustainable that the nightmare of war was in fact a blessing rather than a curse upon the human species.

To be sure, the full collapse of the colonial structure has not been achieved even yet—some 30 years after the war’s conclusion. The southern tip of Africa remains to be liberated and bids well to becoming the bloodiest arena of the final quarter of this century. But despite these remnants of the old order, the degree to which subject nations have been successful in freeing themselves from their colonial masters during the past 35 years has been truly phenomenal.

When World War II began there were only two independent countries (Ethiopia, Liberia) in Africa and barely a half dozen (China, Japan,
Thailand, Afghanistan, Iran, and one can argue about parts of Asia Minor) in Asia. Today these two continents together harbor some 80 independent nations, not including the nearby island republics and mini-states. The Caribbean area also has seen the emergence into independence of a number of colonial dependencies. Although the desire, and in many cases the demands, for independence in most of these countries long predated World War II and in some cases had led to armed uprisings as long ago as the eighteenth century (even earlier in the Portuguese colonies), it was the war’s destruction of the military power of the colonial giants—France and England—which, when combined with the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China and the relentless propaganda pressure applied by the Soviet Union, paved the way for the freeing of the colonies.

In some cases, such as India and the Philippines, the promise of independence was made during the war as a means of mobilizing the subject peoples in support of the fighting. In others, the debilitating effect of the war on the metropolitan power was so great as to undermine its will to retain its colonies. And of course, in some cases it was necessary for the colonial peoples—Indonesia, Indo China, Algeria, Mozambique—to liberate themselves via armed struggle. It is, however, unlikely that any of these routes to independence would have been readily accessible had it not been for the massive conflagration which was World War II.

From the early forties through the early seventies, as the colonial political edifice came tumbling down, the economic structure which underlay this edifice swayed and strained, attempting to adapt itself to the stresses which were fashioning a new international political framework. The United Nations, which had been created just after the war and delicately fashioned to reflect the political realities of 1945, slowly began to mirror the newly emerging power relationships. As the independence movement brought an ever growing number of developing nations into the General Assembly, the policies and perspectives of the developing nations were more clearly reflected in the Assembly’s resolutions. But whenever these policies conflicted with the interests of the developed nations, or big powers, these latter were able to thwart the General Assembly with a Security Council veto, providing thereby a solemn reminder that true power still lay with the increasingly outvoted developed nations.

Historians have often compared the life cycle of a nation to that of a person, with periods of infancy, adolescence, of growth to maturity, and of stagnation and decline. For most of this host of developing nations, which we have come to denote as the Third World, these past 30 years have been a period of infancy, despite the fact that their civilizations have in