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Sleep Now in the Fire

by Nick Kogos

(English 1102)

Rage Against the Machine is a Los Angeles based rock band formed in 1991. “Rage” as they’re referred to, is known for its heavily influenced political lyrics and revolutionary ideas. Vocalist Zack de la Rocha and guitarist Tom Morello are very involved in left-wing political activism, endorsing the American Indian Movement, the Feminist Majority Foundation, Amnesty International, and many environmental protection and anti-war organizations (axisofjustice.org). A common topic found throughout their songs is how imperialism affects the world. In one particularly song, “Sleep Now in the Fire,” Rage explores the consequences of American imperialism, foreign policy, and the penalties of refusing American influence.

Morello and de la Rocha both have personal experience with politics and other social issues. De la Rocha, a Mexican American, was often the butt of racist comments by his classmates and teachers growing up. After fighting years of depression, anger, and drug abuse, de la Rocha decided to vent his anger by becoming a rapper (“Zack de la Rocha Biography”). Morello was born into a very political family. Morello’s father, Ngethe Njoroge, was a Kenyan Guerilla fighter who freed Kenya from British rule. His mother, Mary Morello, a civil rights activist, started an anti-censorship organization called Parents for Rock and Rap. Morello graduated with an honors degree in political science from Harvard University, but decided to use music as his voice (“Biography for Tom Morello”). Both Morello and de la Rocha have been involved and educated in many political issues and use their band Rage to send their message.

In 1999, Rage released a Grammy award-winning album called *The Battle of Los Angeles*. The album’s lyrics were the norm of Rage’s ideas; anti-war, anti-imperialism, and pro-human rights. One song in particular caught my attention. “Sleep Now in the Fire” is one of the most powerful, musically and lyrically songs, on the album. This song features hard guitar riffs and screaming vocals. The song as a whole has a very rebellious and angry tone to it. De la Rocha attempts to explain through the lyrics that America’s foreign policy has a negative effect on the world.

“Sleep Now in the Fire” as a whole illustrates how America is dominating the world through its foreign policy. In a sense, this song is against imperialism. Imperialism, in my own words, is the spread of one nation’s ideas, values, or culture to another nation through diplomacy, propaganda, or force. In other words, every time you take an ancient history class you become familiar with imperialism. The Roman Empire, the British Empire, and the Spanish Empire are examples most people are familiar with. De la Rocha explores one empire not familiar to most, the American empire.

Throughout the song the lyrics mention an “I” or a “Me.” After observing and analyzing the lyrics, the “I” is the personification of American foreign policy. De la Rocha uses this personification to make it easier for the listener to understand how American foreign policy works. In the song, one of the lyrics is, “I am the Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria.” These names are references to Christopher Columbus’ ships he used to discover the New World. The line following is “I am the noose and the rapist, the field’s overseer.” These lines uncover a story about Columbus’ foreign policy and imperialism.

That is, according to anthropologist Jack Weatherford, Columbus stole 1,200 Taino Indians, crammed them in his ships, and sent them back to Spain to be sold as slaves. Hundreds died on transport to Spain and were carelessly tossed into the Atlantic by the sailors. Weatherford also notes

that Columbus tore families apart and within four short years of his arrival to Hispaniola, had killed 1/3 of the Indian population (“Examining the Reputation of Christopher Columbus”). Columbus’ foreign policy to capture and sell Indians as slaves makes him the “noose and the rapist” of human integrity by de la Rocha. This rapist had no regard for the lives he destroyed and the people he killed. He was a rapist of human life. What frightens me more about Columbus’ foreign policy is that neither of my parents were ever taught or had heard the dark side of Columbus before I mentioned it to them. This example of propaganda further conforms “Sleep Now in the Fire’s” American empire.

De la Rocha explains through another stanza how religion and imperialism are linked together: “Jesus blessed me with its future, and I protect it with fire.” De la Rocha explains that Jesus, who is a metaphor for Christianity, can be used as justification for political decisions.

For example, the Spanish Conquistadors was famous for brutally converting Native Indians to Christianity during the 1500s. Indians who refused to accept Christianity were tortured or burned alive. The brutality of the Spaniards even spawned a myth called “Black Legend,” in which Spaniards were portrayed as filthy, monstrous Christians (Williams 130). During the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II had an interesting relationship. As written in the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, the Pope and President Reagan coordinated efforts to weaken communism in Europe (“Religion” 388). I find it interesting that Reagan would call upon the power of the Church to aid his foreign policy. There is a long history of rulers using religion to consolidate power.

During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, more examples of religious imperialism like Reagan’s surfaced. Quoted in the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, “Conservatives especially sponsored a resurgence of overseas missions; 50,000 Americans lived abroad as missionaries...at the end of the 1990s, there were 258 million Christians in Africa and 317 million in Asia (“Religion” 388).” This is a perfect example of religious imperialism. Religious imperialism is forcing a set of religious beliefs or a religion on another population. This can be done by missionaries as listed above, or even by holding a religion superior to another. Ignorance and misunderstanding seem to hand in hand with imperialism. There are hundreds of local religions found throughout Africa and Asia, but somehow Christianity is superior to all them. This is the religious imperialism de la Rocha is talking about. It angers me (and I’m assuming the members of Rage) that the spread of Christianity seems to be a noble cause. Rapper Immortal Technique said it best: “I used to be a Christian pawn, the bible is right, and all your native culture is wrong (“Crossing the Boundary”).” Hopefully, Christianity isn’t spread for this reason.

A more current connection between religion and foreign policy that de la Rocha is talking about is the Iraq War. Adel Darwish studied Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Bush’s decisions to go to war. In both politicians, their justification for war was religion. Darwish argued in his article “God’s Counsel as a Foreign Policy?” that Tony Blair couldn’t convince the public to invade Iraq without indicating that God instructed him to. President Bush also felt God’s hands in his decisions. Darwish quotes, “faithful President George W. Bush last year faced derision after allegedly claiming that God told him to topple Saddam Hussein (“God’s Counsel as a Foreign Policy?”).” The next stanza, the word “Jesus” changes to “party.” The lyric “the party blessed me with its future” could mean, through de la Rocha’s mind, the Republican Party. Although I disagree with the notion that only conservative politicians entangle religion in their policies, it is interesting to note that the Republican Party is the party of all my examples of religion and foreign policy.

The most important lyric in this song is one that is the most controversial. The lyric “crawl with me into tomorrow or I’ll drag you to your grave,” is de la Rocha’s direct reference to the penalty of a country not accepting America’s ideology or imperialism. In other words, de la Rocha is trying to say, you should convert to the American way of life or you’ll be killed resisting it. For example, in early 2003, France was causing quite a stir. France vetoed the United Nations resolution for military support for the Iraq war (Parenti 106). This decision automatically counted France out of the Iraq

War. France refused to spend money on war, refused to risk their soldiers, and remained neutral. The French have the right to voice their opinion as well as the US does. But according to the lyric, France will be punished for “rebellion” against America.

However, Congressman Bob Ney, Walter Jones, and many others, found France’s decision offensive and took action. The CNN March 12, 2003 article’s subhead says it all, “The cafeteria menus in the three House office buildings changed the name of ‘French fries’ to ‘freedom fries’ (“House cafeteria change names”).” Along with French fries, French toast also was changed to “freedom toast.” I find this absolute ridiculous for members of our government to think this way! French restaurants reported drops in sales, French wine and cheeses were bought less, and French art shows, films, and concerts received phone threats or cancelled their events (“Superpatriotism” 107). Even the media jumped on the France boycott bandwagon. As summarized by Cohen, House majority leader, Tom Delay, greets John Kerry saying “bonjour,” because he looks “French.” Delay also added “Mr. Kerry’s lack of support for the war on terror agrees with the argument of the French (“Globalist: Republicans’ Barb”).”

Because France vetoed the Iraq War resolution they have now become our enemies. Anyone, including John Kerry, who sides with the French or even looks French, is labeled anti-American or unpatriotic. The lyric “crawl with me or I’ll drag you to your grave,” lines up perfectly with these examples with France. France refused to “crawl” with American’s decision to go to war, so was dragged to a metaphoric “grave” by the 2003-2004 boycott. France was boycotted because of their opposition of American foreign policy. This lyric can also be interpreted not only as a metaphor but also literally. Drawing back to Columbus’ slaughters, the Taino Indians were literally “dragged to their graves.”

A more recent example of a country being “dragged to their grave” for going against American imperialism is Venezuela. Venezuela’s president Hugo Chavez, throughout his career, has been anti-imperialism and refuses American corporations to penetrate his country. As crazy as Chavez is, his opinion on imperialism does make sense. Chavez doesn’t want to see Venezuela turn into another America. Who can blame him? Venezuela should have its own culture or identity and should remain free of foreign influence. Chavez’s thoughts on American imperialism have been attacked by most of the American media. House Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi, responded to Chavez’s criticisms of President Bush calling him, “an everyday thug (“Democrats warn Chavez: Don’t bash Bush”).” Chavez has been called everything from a dictator to the antichrist. The irony of the matter is Venezuela’s approval rating on Chavez was 82.7% in 2006 (“New Poll Gives Venezuela’s Chavez”). Chavez’s approval rating is almost 2 ½ times higher than President Bush’s is! By refusing imperialism to cross his borders, most Venezuelans view him as a hero. Although he is adored by his people, because he rebelled against America he’ll be punished.

The way Chavez is viewed by the American media and the American public is on opposite ends as Venezuela’s people. Sure, there are other reasons why Chavez is a bad guy; he has arrested political opponents, placed an oil embargo with some countries, but Chavez is dedicated to keep Venezuela free of American influence. Chavez sees Venezuela as a culture-rich independent country, not as another America. As the song lyric suggest, I believe that Rage is trying to tell us that if Venezuela doesn’t go quietly and allow foreign influence, they will be forced into it.

The lyric “I’m deep inside your children, they’ll betray you in my name,” goes hand in hand with the previous lyric. This lyric, Rage argues, explains that American culture is present in other cultures and children of these countries will defend Americans values over their own cultures.

My definition of cultural imperialism is as simple as one country’s values, music, ideas, entertainment, and art encroaching on an inferior country. Student writer, Julia Galeota, argues in the book “America’s Global Influence,” that American culture dominates the world. She quotes from the Manchester magazine, the Guardian, that 80% of the global box office in 2003 were American films. Galeota also quotes from a 1996 study named the “New World Teen Study.” This study, as told by

Galeota, surveyed 26,700 middle-class teens in 45 countries. According to the results, 85% watch MTV everyday. Galeota also explains that an attempt to promote Coca Cola in India, Indian icon Hrithik Roshan, was featured in commercials to appeal to a foreign audience. Pepsi used Indian icon Shahrukh Khan in commercials also to appeal to a foreign audience. As de la Rocha suggests, these examples illustrate how American culture is buried deep in other countries.

McDonald's has over 31,000 restaurants in 119 countries around the world ("America's Global Influence") and Subway has 7500 restaurants outside the US ("International Subway Locations"). These examples show how American culture, entertainment, and corporations dominate the globe. Although the United States is not the only society who exports its culture (other countries such as Italy, the UK, and China have cultural influence in our country), I believe it is the most widespread throughout the world. Based of these examples and studies, I understand where de la Rocha was coming from. However, I disagree with de la Rocha's claim that children outside of America will "betray" their own culture to favor American culture.

Global acceptance of Nike, McDonald's, MTV, Coca Cola, Wal-Mart, Disney, or Starbucks, does not come easy, or quietly. There have been hundreds of protests and resistances worldwide to keep these American companies out. A majority of the demonstrations have happened since the late 1990s and the number of global protests increases each year. Ever present at the protests are a growing number of teens and young adults. I disagree with de la Rocha that children or teens accept American culture because there is plenty of resistance and boycott worldwide.

In the end, "Sleep Now in the Fire" took the positive thoughts of America's foreign policy and turned them on their head. Tom Morello and Zack de la Rocha have presented an interesting side of the United States that rarely surfaces. Using imperialism as foreign policy can cause genocide, hatred, and can erase years of world culture. America's leaders need to throw on Rage's *Battle of Los Angeles* and see the world from a different perspective. America's foreign policy is tearing the world apart. The world needs more artists like Rage Against the Machine, who bring our ears sounds of inequality, tyranny, and political abuse. Rage Against the Machine gave us two things: the world's perspective on American imperialism and gave the world's voiceless, a voice.

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