

The war against Iraq and America's drive for world domination

By David North
4 October 2002

The following is a report given by David North, chairman of the World Socialist Web Site editorial board, to a well-attended public meeting at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor on October 1, 2002.

On September 17, 2002 the Bush administration published its “National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” So far, there has been no serious examination of this important document in the establishment media. This is unfortunate, to say the least, because this document advances the political and theoretical justification for a colossal escalation of American militarism. The document asserts as the guiding policy of the United States the right to use military force anywhere in the world, at any time it chooses, against any country it believes to be, or it believes may at some point become, a threat to American interests. No other country in modern history, not even Nazi Germany at the height of Hitler’s madness, has asserted such a sweeping claim to global hegemony—or, to put it more bluntly, world domination—as is now being made by the United States.

The message of this document, stripped of its cynical euphemisms and calculated evasions, is unmistakably clear: The United States government asserts the right to bomb, invade and destroy whatever country it chooses. It refuses to respect as a matter of international law the sovereignty of any other country, and reserves the right to get rid of any regime, in any part of the world, that is, appears to be, or might some day become, hostile to what the United States considers to be its vital interests. Its threats are directed, in the short term, against so-called “failed states”—that is, former colonies and impoverished Third World countries ravaged by the predatory policies of imperialism. But larger competitors of the United States, whom the document refers to, in a revival of pre-World War II imperialist jargon, as “Great Powers,” are by no means out of the gun sights of the Bush administration. The wars against small and defenseless states that the United States is now preparing—first of all against Iraq—will prove to be the preparation for military onslaughts against more formidable targets.

The document begins by boasting that “The United States possesses unprecedented—and unequalled—strength and influence in the world.” It declares with breathtaking arrogance that “The US national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of *our values* and *our national interests*.” This formula is so striking that it should be committed to memory: American Values + American Interests = A Distinctly American Internationalism. It is a very distinct sort of internationalism that proclaims what’s good for America is good for the world! As President Bush asserts in the introduction of the document, America’s values “are right and true for every person, in every society...”

These values are none other than a collection of the banal nostrums of the American plutocracy, such as “respect for private property”; “pro-growth legal and regulatory policies to encourage business investment, innovation, and entrepreneurial activity”; “tax policies—particularly lower marginal tax rates—that improve incentives for work and investment”; “strong financial systems that allow capital to be

put to its most efficient use”; “sound fiscal policies to support business activity.” The document then declares: “The lessons of history are clear: market economies, not command-and-control economies with the heavy hand of government, are the best way to promote prosperity and reduce poverty. Policies that further strengthen market incentives and market institutions are relevant for all economies—industrialized countries, emerging markets, and the developing world.”

All these right-wing platitudes are asserted in the midst of a deepening world economic crisis, in which entire continents are suffering the consequences of market economics that have shattered whatever once existed of their social infrastructures and reduced billions of people to conditions that defy description. One decade after the dismantling of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism, the death rate of Russia exceeds its birthrate. South America, a laboratory where the International Monetary Fund has gleefully practiced its anti-social experiments, is in a state of economic disintegration. In Southern Africa, a substantial portion of the population is infected with the HIV virus. According to the World Bank,

“The AIDS crisis is having a devastating impact on developing countries, especially in Africa. Health care systems—weakened by the impact of AIDS, along with conflict and poor management—cannot cope with traditional illnesses. Malaria and tuberculosis continue to kill millions—malaria alone is estimated to reduce GDP growth rates by 0.5 percent per year on average in Sub-Saharan Africa. Life expectancy in the region fell from 50 years in 1987 to 47 years in 1999; in the countries hardest hit by AIDS (such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Lesotho) the average lifespan was cut short by more than ten years.”[1]

These catastrophic conditions are the product of the capitalist system and the rule of the market. The strategic document acknowledges in passing that “half of the human race lives on less than \$2 a day,” but, as to be expected, the prescription drawn up by the Bush administration is the more intensive application of the economic policies that are responsible for the misery that exists all over the world.

Defining its idea of a “distinctly American internationalism,” the document states that “While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone...” In another passage, the document warns that the United States “will take the actions necessary to ensure that our efforts to meet our global security commitments and protect Americans are not impaired by the potential for investigations, inquiry, or prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose jurisdiction does not extend to Americans and which we do not accept.” In other words, the actions of the leaders of the United States will not be restrained by the conventions

of international law.

In a study of the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, Telford Taylor—who worked as an assistant of the chief American prosecutor, Robert H. Jackson—wrote that “The laws of war do not apply only to the suspected criminals of vanquished nations. There is no moral or legal basis for immunizing nations from scrutiny. The laws of war are not a one-way street.”[2] The refusal of the United States to recognize the authority of the International Criminal Court is of immense international political significance, and testifies to the acute awareness of American leaders that their policies are of a criminal character and could subject them, if international law were enforced, to the most severe penalties.

As Telford Taylor stresses, the prosecution of the Nazi leaders at the Nuremberg trials was based on a new legal concept: that their planning for and decision to wage aggressive war constituted a crime. This charge took precedence even over the counts in the indictments that were related to the atrocities committed by the Nazis against Jews, civilians in occupied countries, and prisoners of war. In a memorandum prepared by Taylor arguing in support of indicting Nazi leaders for planning aggressive war, he wrote:

“Only the most incorrigible legalists can pretend to be shocked by the conclusion that the perpetrator of an aggressive war acts at peril of being punished for his perpetration, even if no tribunal has ever previously decided that perpetration of an aggressive war is a crime.”[3]

Taylor continued:

“It is important that the trial *not* become an inquiry into the *causes* of the war. It cannot be established that Hitlerism was the sole cause of the war, and there should be no effort to do this. Nor, I believe, should there be any effort or time spent on apportioning out responsibility for causing the war among the many nations and individuals concerned. The question of causation is important and will be discussed for many years, but it has no place in this trial, which must stick rigorously to the doctrine that planning and launching an aggressive war is illegal, whatever may be the factors that caused the defendants to plan and to launch. Contributing causes may be pleaded by the defendants before the bar of history, but not before the tribunal.”[4]

This issue is of extraordinary importance today—and not only in relation to the present ongoing and far-advanced preparations for an unprovoked American war against Iraq. If the precedent established at Nuremberg has any contemporary relevance, the entire strategy elaborated in this document proceeds outside the bounds of international law. The essential claim asserted in this document, which serves as the foundation of American strategy, is the right of the United States to take unilateral military action against another country without offering credible evidence that it is acting to prevent a clear and verifiable threat of attack. This assertion of all-encompassing powers to resort to violence whenever it decides to do so is justified with loosely-constructed language that cannot withstand even a cursory analysis: “We must be prepared to stop *rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction* against the United States and our allies and friends.”

Who defines what a “rogue state” is? Is it any state that challenges, directly or indirectly, American interests? A list of all those countries that

the Bush administration considers to be “rogue states,” not to mention potential “rogue states,” is a very long one. This list certainly includes Cuba. It might even, after the reelection of Gerhard Schroeder as chancellor, include Germany!

We should also ask for a precise definition of “terrorist.” This term is notoriously vague and subject to political manipulation. Moreover, what standard of evidence will be required to establish a link between a so-called “rogue state” and a “terrorist client” before the United States attacks the former? Just the other day, the president, his national security adviser and the secretary of defense announced that there is a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda, without providing any factual substantiation to support this claim, and in contradiction to what is actually known about the antagonistic attitude of Iraq’s secular regime toward Islamic fundamentalist organizations.

Finally, the assertion of the right to take military action against “rogue states and their terrorist clients *before* they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction” can only mean that the United States claims the right to attack whatever state it identifies as a *potential* threat. Though a state may not be, at present, a threat to the United States; though it may not at the present time be planning, let alone actively preparing, an attack against the United States, it may still be a legitimate target for an attack if the US government identifies it as a potential or embryonic threat to America’s national security.

A definition of “threat” that requires no overt action against the United States, but merely the potential to become a threat at some point in the future, would place virtually every country in the world on the list of possible targets for an American attack. This is not an exaggeration. The document speaks not only of “enemies,” but also of “potential adversaries,” and warns them not to pursue “a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.” It directly warns China against attempting to acquire “advanced military capabilities,” asserting that by doing so “China is following an outdated path that, in the end, will hamper its own pursuit of national greatness”—that is, it will emerge as a threat that may require a preemptive military response by the United States.

While the report tells China that the pursuit of “advanced military capabilities” means following “an outdated path,” it proclaims hypocritically just two pages later that “It is time to reaffirm the essential role of American military strength. We must build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge.” And this project entails a vast expansion of America’s military presence throughout the world. “To contend with uncertainty and to meet the many security challenges we face, the United States will require bases and stations within and beyond Western Europe and Northeast Asia, as well as temporary access arrangements for the long-distance deployment of US forces.”

The document asserts repeatedly that the new doctrine of preemptive strikes against existing and/or potential threats, and the abandonment of the previous doctrine of deterrence, is a necessary response to the events of September 11, 2001, when the United States suddenly confronted a new, unprecedented and unimagined danger. “The nature of the Cold War threat,” the report asserts, “required the United States ... to emphasize deterrence of the enemy’s use of force, producing a grim strategy of mutual assured destruction. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, our security environment has undergone profound transformation.” Somewhat later, the document describes the Soviet Union as “a generally status quo, risk-adverse adversary. Deterrence was an effective defense.”

For those of us for whom the 1980s is comparatively recent history, who still remember the 1960s, and even happen to know a few things about the history of the 1950s, these are remarkable words. Those unfamiliar with the history of the Cold War would hardly imagine that the authors of this strategic document—who now describe the USSR in almost

nostalgic terms as a “status quo, risk-averse adversary” against whom a gentlemanly and polite deterrence was effective—are more or less the same people who, as recently as the 1980s, were describing the Soviet Union as the “focus of evil” against whom the United States had to prepare for all-out war. The present defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, was closely associated with the right-wing Committee for the Present Danger, formed in the 1970s, which was bitterly opposed to arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. This organization demanded a massive military build-up against the USSR, and argued that it was possible for the United States to wage and win a nuclear war against the Soviet Union. The Reagan administration’s sponsorship of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), known as “Star Wars,” arose from the demand of extreme right-wing elements in the Republican Party—among whom are now to be found the principal *dramatis personae* who direct the policies of the Bush administration, especially Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz—for the development of technology that would make it possible for the United States to consider the use of nuclear weapons against the USSR to be a viable military option.

Here we come to the historical falsification and political deception that underlie the Bush administration’s National Security Strategy—the claim that the policies outlined in the report are essentially a response to the events of September 11, determined and shaped by the inescapable military obligations imposed upon the United States by the threat of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Far from being an exceptional response to the events of September 11, 2001, the plan for world domination outlined in the National Security Strategy of the Bush administration has been in development for more than a decade.

The origins of the National Security Strategy unveiled two weeks ago can be dated back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. This had for the United States the most far-reaching significance. For nearly three-quarters of a century, the fate of American imperialism and the Soviet Union were inextricably linked. The October Revolution that brought the Bolshevik Party to power followed by only a few months the April 1917 entry of the United States into World War I. Thus, from the earliest days of its emergence as the principal imperialist power, the United States confronted the reality of a workers state that proclaimed the advent of a new historical epoch of world socialist revolution. Despite the Stalinist bureaucracy’s subsequent betrayal of the revolutionary internationalist ideals initially proclaimed by Lenin and Trotsky, the political aftershocks produced by the overthrow of capitalism in Russia continued to reverberate for decades—in the growth of the social consciousness and political militancy of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, including the United States, and in the wave of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles that swept across the globe, especially in the aftermath of World War II.

Though it emerged from World War II as the leader of world capitalism, the United States was not in a position to organize the world as it saw fit. The initial expectation that the possession of the atomic bomb would enable the United States to intimidate and, if need be, destroy the Soviet Union was shattered by the Soviet production of a nuclear device in 1949. The victory of the Chinese Revolution that same year represented a devastating blow to America’s expectation that it would exercise unchallenged sway over Asia.

Throughout the early years of the Cold War a bitter battle raged within the ruling circles of the US government over how to deal with the Soviet Union. The ferocious anticommunist witch-hunting and political purges of the late 1940s and early 1950s were key elements of the environment in which this debate took place. A substantial faction of the ruling elite advocated a “rollback” strategy—that is, the destruction of the Soviet Union and the Maoist regime in China, even if this entailed the use of nuclear weapons. Another faction, associated with the State Department theorist George F. Kennan, advocated “containment.”

The conflict between these factions came to a head during the Korean War, as the Truman administration came close to authorizing the use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese army. At a press conference held on November 30, 1950, Truman was asked how he intended to deal with the entry of China into the Korean War. The president replied: “We will take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation, just as we always have.” He was then asked specifically if that included use of the atomic bomb, to which Truman replied, “That includes every weapon we have.” When pressed by stunned reporters to clarify this statement, Truman reiterated that use of the atomic bomb was being actively considered.[5]

The international uproar that ensued compelled the US government to retract Truman’s statement. Finally, the Truman administration rejected General MacArthur’s demand that 30 to 50 nuclear bombs be dropped on the Manchurian-Korean border to spread “a belt of radioactive cobalt” from the Sea of Japan to the Yellow Sea. This proposal was not the brainchild of one mad general. This and similar ideas had been seriously pondered and supported. Among those who publicly advocated the use of nuclear weapons was Congressman Albert Gore, Sr., the father of the future vice president. Two factors led to the decision not to use nuclear bombs in the Korean War. First, there were serious doubts that it would prove effective in the existing military situation. Second, and more decisive, was the fear that the bombing of Korea might set into motion a political chain reaction, leading to a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. During the remaining decades of the Cold War, the real meaning of “deterrence” was not what the United States prevented the USSR from doing, but what the possibility of Soviet retaliation prevented the United States from doing.

This is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of the United States’ nuclear strategy during the Cold War, let alone of the Cold War as a whole. But for the purpose of understanding the events of the last decade and the present actions of the US government, it must be stressed that broad sections of the American ruling class chafed under the restraints that the existence of the Soviet Union placed upon the exercise of US military power. Throughout this period, there remained a powerful constituency within what President Eisenhower called the “military-industrial complex” that pushed relentlessly for a confrontation with the Soviet Union. As I have already noted, many of those who presently occupy powerful positions in the Bush administration were frantically advocating a massive anti-Soviet military buildup in the 1970s and 1980s, and even arguing that a nuclear strike against the USSR had to be considered a viable option.

The increasing aggressiveness of American foreign policy was not an exclusively Republican Party project. The administration of Jimmy Carter hit upon the idea of inciting Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan in order to destabilize the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union. As Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, acknowledged several years ago, American operations in Afghanistan were well under way before the Soviet Union decided to intervene militarily in that country.

One further point must be made about Soviet-American relations during the Cold War. I believe that it can be strongly and persuasively argued that the degree of American aggressiveness was related to the general state of the world capitalist economy. During the heyday of the post-World War II expansion of international capitalism, the bitter internal struggles within the American ruling elite tended to be resolved on the basis of the arguments of those who advocated compromise with the Soviet Union. To the extent that general conditions of worldwide economic expansion allowed American capitalism to operate profitably within the geopolitical framework of the so-called East-West Divide, the American ruling elite made a strategic decision to avoid, or at least postpone, a nuclear confrontation with the USSR. Open military conflicts

were limited to peripheral areas.

However, as world capitalism entered in the 1970s into a period of protracted stagnation and slump that arose from deep structural and systemic problems—of which the present recession is an advanced symptom—far more aggressive tendencies asserted themselves and found a sympathetic response within ruling circles. One might also add that the two great oil shocks of the 1970s—the first occurred in 1973 as a result of the decision of Arab states to impose a boycott on the sale of oil, the second followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979—increased the determination of the American ruling class to prevent any future disruption of its access to oil, natural gas and other essential strategic resources.

The massive military buildup of the 1980s seemed to indicate that powerful sections of the US ruling elite were willing to risk a major confrontation with the Soviet Union. This bellicose international policy was the mirror reflection of the domestic policies pursued by the Reagan administration, which initiated an aggressive and successful program of union-busting and the “rollback” of social reforms that had been won by the working class over the previous 50 years.

In the end, it was the Soviet bureaucracy that decided to liquidate the USSR. The self-dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991—the final betrayal of the heritage of the October Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy—created for American imperialism an unprecedented historical opportunity. For the first time it could operate in an international environment in which there did not exist any significant restraints—military or political—on the use of force to achieve its aims. From this point on, internal discussions on the strategic aims of the United States were taken over by the most vicious and reactionary tendencies.

The demise of the USSR, they declared, created for the United States the opportunity to establish an unchallengeable global hegemony. The task of the United States was to exploit what right-wing columnist Charles Krauthammer referred to in 1991 as a “unipolar moment” to establish an absolutely dominant global position. The United States, argued Krauthammer, should not hesitate to use military power to get whatever it wanted. The Europeans and Japanese should be treated with contempt, and compelled to recognize that they had to approach the United States as supplicants. While it might be politically advisable for US leaders to pay lip service to multilateralism, that policy was, in reality, dead. The time had come for the United States to exercise its power unilaterally, “unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them.”[6]

The grotesque Mr. Krauthammer probably did not realize when he wrote these words that he was vindicating a prediction made many years before by the greatest Marxist of the twentieth century. Writing in 1933, Leon Trotsky recalled that Germany instigated World War I to “organize” Europe. But the aims of American imperialism would prove to be far more ambitious. “The United States,” Trotsky wrote, “must ‘organize’ the world. History is bringing humanity face to face with the volcanic eruption of American imperialism.”[7]

The first Bush administration responded to the demise of the USSR by initiating a full-scale review of US military strategy. Its overriding objectives were to exploit aggressively the power vacuum left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and, by so doing, establish a geopolitical stranglehold that would prevent any country from emerging as a credible competitor of the United States. The key to this project was to be the use of military power to intimidate and, if necessary, smash any enemy or adversary, existing or potential. In 1992, Defense Secretary Richard Cheney and then-general Colin Powell called for the implementation of vastly expanded operational objectives for US military forces. They stipulated that the military should be able to complete one major war in 100 days and two in less than 180 days.

The election of Bill Clinton did not produce any significant change in

the increasingly aggressive attitude of American military planners. Under the slogan, “Shaping the World through Engagement,” the 1990s saw the emergence of a political consensus within both the Democratic and Republican parties that saw military power as the principal means by which the United States would secure long-term global dominance.

This insistence on the decisive role of military power arises not from the strength, but rather the underlying weakness of American capitalism. In essence, militarism is symptomatic of economic and social decline. As it loses, and with good reason, confidence in the economic strength of American capitalism vis-à-vis its major international rivals, and grows increasingly fearful about fissures within the domestic social structure, the ruling elite views military power as the means by which it can counteract all the troubling negative tendencies. As Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* wrote in March 1999, “The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald’s cannot flourish without a McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.... Without America on duty, there will be no America On Line.”

The issue of Iraq has played a central role in high-level discussions on America’s strategic ambitions. In a sense, the first war against Iraq occurred just a few months too early for American imperialism. In January-February 1991, with the fate of the USSR still uncertain, the Bush administration considered it too risky to overstep the boundaries of the UN mandate and attempt unilaterally to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. But almost from the moment the war had come to a close, there was a sense within powerful sections of the ruling elite that an immense opportunity had been missed. Within the context of the new strategic aim to prevent the emergence of any power or combination of powers that might challenge American domination, the conquest of Iraq came to be seen as a crucial strategic objective. In countless documents produced by right-wing strategists, it was openly argued that the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein would provide the United States with strategic control over oil, the supremely critical resource that is essential to the economies of its potential economic and military rivals in Europe and Japan. Policy specialists George Friedman and Meredith Lebard argued in their influential book *The Coming War with Japan*, published in 1991:

“With oil, the Persian Gulf becomes much more than a regional issue. It becomes the pivot of the world economy. For the US, domination of the region would open the door on unprecedented international power. On the other hand, allowing another regional power, such as Iraq or Iran, to seize control of the region and consolidate its own power would close the door on the possibility, unless the US were prepared to wage a ground war in the region.

“During the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US response was explicitly for one purpose: preventing Iraqi domination of the region’s oil supply. However, it opened up quite another possibility. Success of the US in retaking Kuwait, breaking the Saddam regime, and seizing control of Iraq would place the US in control of a large amount of the world’s oil reserves and production. No matter how benignly this power might be used, the US would emerge in control of the international economic system. ...

“...It would be in a position to set production quotas and therefore prices, as well as control the movement of oil. A country like Japan, dependent on the countries within the Straits of Hormuz for over 60 percent of its oil imports, would find that its greatest economic competitor—the world’s only large economy, and one increasingly bitter toward Japan—was in direct control of the Japanese supply of oil. ...

“...The leading political power, the US, suddenly finds itself in a position where its political power can be used to gain a hammerlock on the international economy.

“The Persian Gulf will necessarily become a center of controversy between the US and Japan. Japan’s vulnerability to the flow of oil from the area means that increased US power in the region must increase Japanese insecurity. The regionalization of conflict and the regional segmentation of economies will open an important door for the United States: the manipulation of Japan’s oil supply could well end the challenge that Japanese exports pose to the US.”[8]

Except in the American mass media, where discussion of this sensitive issue is virtually taboo, it is widely recognized all over the world that oil, not so-called weapons of mass destruction, is the central preoccupation of the United States. While the war in Afghanistan provided the opportunity for the establishment of new American military bases in Central Asia—which is believed to hold the second largest reserves of petroleum in the world—the conquest of Iraq would immediately place the second largest reserve of crude oil in the Persian Gulf region under the control of the United States. To quote the ineffable Thomas Friedman, “[H]aving broken Iraq, we own Iraq.”

The Bush administration, whose leading personnel consists of people like Cheney who honed their criminal skills as oil industry executives, looks at the Persian Gulf as the potential jewel in the crown of an emerging American empire. If domination of that region were combined with effective control of the oil and natural gas reserves that will be eventually pumped out of Central Asia, the leaders of American imperialism believe that they will have achieved the long-term strategic hegemony that has eluded the United States for so long. This vision of a world dominion, secured through control of strategic global resources, is a reactionary fantasy that has found an enthusiastic audience among broad sections of the Establishment. The frame of mind that prevails within America’s political and financial aristocracy is reflected in a new book by Robert Kaplan, entitled *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. In a typical passage, he declares:

“The more successful our foreign policy, the more leverage America will have in the world. Thus, the more likely that future historians will look back on the twenty-first-century United States as an empire as well as a republic, however different from that of Rome and every other empire throughout history. For as the decades and the centuries march on, and the United States has had a hundred presidents, or 150 even, instead of forty-three, and they appear in long lists like the rulers of bygone empires—Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman—the comparison with antiquity may grow rather than diminish. Rome, in particular, is a model for hegemonic power, using various means to encourage a modicum of order in a disorderly world...”[9]

This drivel is of interest only as a sort of bizarre cultural phenomenon—an example of the delusory state of mind within a ruling elite that has lost all sense of history and of contemporary reality, not to mention common decency.

It does not seem to occur to Mr. Kaplan that to the extent that the United States seeks to implement these fantasies, it will encounter opposition: first of all, from those who are the immediate targets of American depredations—the masses in the countries targeted for conquest. There is also the opposition of America’s imperialist rivals in Europe and Japan, who simply cannot accept a situation that threatens them with economic

strangulation. It is precisely the growing fears over the implications of America’s long-term strategic aims—the establishment of global domination—that find expression in the increasingly open opposition to the US plans for war in Iraq. A likely consequence of a US war against Iraq will be an enormous intensification of inter-imperialist conflicts—principally between the United States and its major economic and geopolitical competitors. The stage will be set for World War III.

So far, in discussing the reasons for the drive of the United States for war, we have concentrated on the global geo-strategic and economic motivations. But there is yet another crucial factor in the political equation—that is, the increasingly explosive state of social relations in the United States and the threat that this poses to capitalist rule.

Throughout the past decade US policy experts have expressed concern over growing signs of a decay of social cohesion. Samuel Huntington, who is best known for his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, warned several years ago that the end of the Cold War had deprived the US government of a cause that could foster mass support for the state. There did not seem to exist, he wrote, any genuine sense of national interests that commanded mass support. The problem noted by Huntington, however, is not primarily ideological. It is rooted in increasingly irreconcilable social conflicts within American society. It is becoming ever more difficult to mask the massive social inequality that presently characterizes American society. The concentration of extraordinary levels of personal wealth among a very small percentage of the population has far-reaching social implications, no matter how vigorously the mass media glorifies the rich and their lifestyles.

The erosion of democratic norms and the ever-more apparent dysfunctional state of American politics are objective consequences of social polarization. In the year 2000, for the first time since the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, it was not possible to arrive at a democratic resolution of the election. In the end, the financial plutocracy handpicked the president.

The United States is beset by social problems for which the existing political setup has no answers. Indeed, it is unable to even address them. The existing two-party system, whose personnel are utterly dependent on the financial support of the plutocracy, is thoroughly unrepresentative of the general population. How else can one explain the fact that the deep unease and ambivalence felt by millions of Americans toward the drive toward war find virtually no articulation in the political establishment. Rather, the political establishment, whose constituencies are different fractions of the richest two percent of the population, is absolutely incapable of giving voice to the concerns and interests of the broad masses.

The current economic crisis has profoundly deepened the estrangement between the working class and the ruling class. The ongoing exposures of the criminality of the corporate elite threaten to transform the economic crisis—which is, in itself, of a fairly serious character—into a general crisis of class rule. To no small extent, the Bush administration hopes that dramatic successes overseas will somehow distract the people from the domestic crisis. But history provides many examples of the catastrophes that befell reactionary regimes that played with war to keep domestic problems at bay. Governments that prescribe war as a medication for a failing domestic economy and intensifying social conflict may suffer all sorts of unforeseen side effects—of which revolution may prove to be the most serious.

The drive of the Bush administration toward war confronts every student with political and, I might add, moral questions of the greatest magnitude. First of all, let me make this point as emphatically as I can. The policies of the Bush administration are not merely mistaken ... they are criminal. Those responsible for these policies are not misguided individuals. They are political criminals. But the criminality of their policy flows from the essentially criminal character of American

imperialism—which strives to shore up a faltering capitalist system through a policy of plunder and mass murder. There is really no essential difference between the methods employed by the ruling elite within the United States and those it uses internationally.

The recent exposures of corporate corruption have a far-reaching social significance. The daily operations of American business have assumed a criminal character. The ruling elite has accumulated massive wealth through the willful and systematic plundering of industrial, financial and social resources. American CEOs could sum up their tenures at the corporations they wrecked by slightly modifying the words of Caesar: “I came, I saw, I stole.” There is not, in fact, any major difference, between the Mafia-like “businessmen” who have plundered Russia during the past decade and the criminal gang of CEOs who have looted their corporations. Nor is there any fundamental difference in the methods used by the American capitalist class to achieve its international objectives. It wants Iraqi oil, and so it intends to steal it—with the help of the United States military.

It is the responsibility of students to oppose these criminals—but opposition must be based on a scientific understanding of politics and the social dynamics of capitalist society. A serious and sustained fight against imperialist war cannot be separated from a struggle against the socioeconomic interests which give rise to war—that is, to capitalism. Moreover, that fight can be successful only to the extent that it strives to mobilize the mass social force within the United States and internationally that stands objectively in opposition to capitalism. That social force is the working class, which comprises the overwhelming mass of the people in modern capitalist society.

Thus, at the very heart of the struggle against war is the organization and mobilization of the working class as an independent political force. Within the United States, this means, first and foremost, liberating the working class from the political domination of the Democratic Party and building a new, independent, socialist party. The programmatic cutting edge of such a party must be its commitment to a struggle against imperialism based on the perspective of the international unity of the working class.

Such a party exists in the United States. It is the Socialist Equality Party, which is in political solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International. I ask you all to consider joining it.

Notes:

1. *PovertyNet, Poverty Reduction and the World Bank*, World Bank Executive Summary.
2. *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials* (New York, 1992), p. 641.
3. *Ibid*, p. 51.
4. *Ibid*, pp. 51-52.
5. Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero* (New York, 2000) pp. 253-54.
6. *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 1, 1991, p. 33.
7. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34* (New York, 1998) p. 302.
8. New York, 1991. pp. 210-11.
9. New York, 2002, p. 153.

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