

The political foundations for the struggle against militarism and war

By Nick Beams
26 August 2006

The following report was delivered by Nick Beams at public meetings organised by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) in Sydney and Melbourne on August 22 and 24 to oppose the US-backed Israeli war on Lebanon (see article). Nick Beams is the SEP national secretary and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site.

My task at this meeting is to address some of the wider issues of political perspective that arise from the US-Israeli war on Lebanon. Above all, it is to make clear the essential components of the political program that must now be advanced against the eruption of imperialist militarism and violence.

There are two outstanding and interconnected features of the present period. The first is the complete disregard for, and overturning of, all precepts of international law. The second is the extent of official lying by all the major governments, along with the absolute prostration of the mass media, which now function as little more than the propaganda machines of the various governments. Nothing recalls the present period so much as the decade of the 1930s, which led eventually to the eruption of the Second World War in 1939.

In that period, the chief source of global instability was the drive by German and Japanese imperialism to change what they regarded as an unfavourable position vis-à-vis their major rivals, the British Empire and the United States.

In Europe, German imperialism, having been defeated by the Allies in World War I, sought to reassert its position by overturning the Versailles Treaty. Its aim was to secure a dominant position on the continent of Europe, thereby enabling it to take its place as a world power alongside the United States and Great Britain.

In the East, Japanese imperialism, a late starter in the drive for empire and colonies as it sought to avoid being colonised itself, looked to establish its dominance over East Asia, with colonies in Taiwan, Korea and China. It eventually came into collision with the interests of the United States, thereby transforming what had to that point been a war in Europe into a full-scale global conflict.

Today, the United States is playing the role of chief aggressor as it seeks to use military means to establish its global dominance. In order to understand how this has come about, it is necessary, if only briefly, to examine the main trends of development of the past six decades.

The victory of the Allies over Germany and Japan in World War II brought to a close the period of inter-imperialist conflict that marked the first five decades of the twentieth century. A new economic and political equilibrium was established, grounded on the economic and military supremacy of the United States, on the one hand, and the Cold War division of the world, on the other.

The pre-eminent position of the United States among the major imperialist powers rested not simply, or even primarily, on its military supremacy, but was based on its ability to utilise its economic power to establish the basis for an expansion of the capitalist economy as a whole.

This general expansion not only brought about the revival of devastated Europe. It was also vitally necessary to the economic health and well-being of the US itself. If the experience of the 1930s had established anything, it was that the US economy could no longer develop on the basis of the resources and markets of the North American continent, but required the whole world.

In other words, the US could only ensure its dominance in the post-war period to the extent that it economically rebuilt the other major capitalist powers. However, in doing so, it undermined its own relative economic supremacy. Herein lay the contradiction at the heart of the post-war equilibrium that was to lead to its breakdown.

In tracing the relative decline of the US, two years stand out—1971 and 1989. In August 1971, US President Nixon removed the gold backing from the American dollar and shattered the system of fixed exchange rates that had formed the basis for the post-war economic expansion. The demise of the so-called Bretton Woods monetary system was a dramatic expression of the relative decline of the US.

When that system had been established at the end of the war, based on the exchangeability of dollars for gold at the rate of \$35 per ounce, the vast superiority of the US meant that the central problem in the world economy was acquisition of dollars. A quarter of a century later, Nixon closed the gold window because the US could no longer redeem the dollars circulating in the rest of the world. The decision signified that while the US was still the dominant economic power, its relative superiority was in the process of being undermined.

By 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, the United States had been transformed from the largest creditor nation in the world to its biggest debtor. This underlying weakness, however, was covered up for a period by the triumphalism that followed the collapse of the East European Stalinist regimes and the eventual liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The demise of the USSR appeared, at first sight, to signify the historical triumph of the United States, and more generally, of the capitalist system. And there were those who loudly proclaimed this to be the case.

In fact, it was to mark the end of the political structures based on the Cold War that had played such a decisive role in regulating world politics in the post-war period. Rather than opening a new era of peace, the end of the Cold War has seen the eruption of militarism on an ever-widening scale. Nowhere has this process been more clearly visible than in the Middle East.

Control over the Middle East and its vast oil resources has always been a matter of decisive significance for the US. In 1943, as the extent of its oil reserves became apparent, the Roosevelt administration declared the security of Saudi Arabia to be a matter of strategic interest for the United States. In February 1945, in the final days of World War II and just weeks before his death, Roosevelt met with the Saudi king to establish the basis of the post-war relationship—the US would provide security and maintain the House of Saud in return for the continuity of oil supplies.

In 1953, the importance of oil was underscored by events in Iran when

the CIA organised a coup. It overthrew the nationalist government of Prime Minister Mossadegh, which had moved to nationalise British oil interests, and reinstated Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as the Shah. With huge quantities of weapons supplied from the US, the Shah's regime became the guardian of the Persian Gulf.

By the early 1970s, events were taking a new turn. The breakdown of the old economic order and the rise of nationalist forces in the Middle East saw the first oil crisis in 1973-74, as prices quadrupled in a matter of months. In 1975, an article appeared in *Harper's* magazine entitled "Seizing Arab Oil". It outlined how America could solve its problems by taking over and operating the Arab oil fields. Similar articles appeared in other publications. They were all based on background briefings provided by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

The problem for the American administration was that the United States did not have a military capacity in the Persian Gulf. In 1979, the US suffered a major blow with the overthrow of the Shah, and another spike in oil prices. Carter designated the Gulf as a zone of US influence, declaring that "an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force". He created a rapid deployment force to back up the threat.

During the 1980s, the US sought to destabilise Iran by backing the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. Iraq was provided with biological material, including anthrax, for the manufacture of chemical weapons and received battlefield intelligence from the US. Considerable economic aid was provided, with at least \$5 billion channelled to Iraq through the Commodity Credit Corporation program between 1983 and 1990, enabling it to continue the war.

At the conclusion of that eight-year conflict, the Iraqi regime, confronted with debts of more than \$40 billion, was in desperate need of financial resources. Yet, it was being undermined by the Kuwaiti regime, which was selling oil outside OPEC quotas, as well as taking oil from Iraqi fields. When Saddam Hussein asked American ambassador April Glaspie in July 1990 what the US attitude would be toward the Iraq-Kuwait dispute, he was told that America had no opinion on inter-Arab conflicts like Iraq's border dispute with Kuwait. This was taken as a go-ahead.

However, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the US organised its Gulf War coalition. The war provided an important strategic opening for the US military. Until 1991, it had not been able to persuade any of the Arab Gulf states to allow American bases on their soil. With the onset of the Gulf War, Saudi Arabia and other states no longer opposed a direct American military presence.

The Gulf War of 1990-91 was presented as a war for the independence of the tiny nation of Kuwait against the attempts of the Iraqi regime to become the strongman of the Middle East, threatening not only Kuwait, but Saudi Arabia and other countries. No effort was spared to demonise Saddam Hussein as the new Hitler.

In fact, the war marked the start of a new era of colonialism. Significantly it took place, not in contravention of the United Nations, but under its auspices. As our movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), noted at the time:

"In their determination to destroy and plunder Iraq, the imperialists displayed an astonishing unity of purpose. The proceedings at the United Nations, the rather seedy centre of imperialist debauchery, were as dignified as those of a military brothel, with scores of bourgeois diplomats lining up outside the doors of the Security Council 'to get in on the action'. The call issued by the United States for the assault against Iraq was answered not only by Britain, France, Germany and Japan, but also by a host of lesser imperialist powers—Australia, Canada, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and Switzerland, to name only a few.

Even Norway, which annually dispenses a prestigious 'peace prize' in honour of the inventor of dynamite, made a contribution to the anti-Iraqi crusade. Underlying the broad participation in this coalition was the unstated understanding that the war against Iraq would legitimise a revival of colonial policy by all the imperialist powers. Support for the American-led war was viewed by the other imperialist powers as a necessary down payment for future US acquiescence, if not full support, for their own enterprises in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America."

But, as the ICFI statement went on to point out, there is no friendship among thieves. It warned that the resurgence of colonialism would have far-reaching consequences, just as the plundering of small countries in the first decades of the twentieth century led eventually to conflicts among the imperialist powers themselves.

In the case of Iraq, the conflicts did not take long to surface. Under the terms of the Iraqi surrender, economic sanctions were kept in place pending the destruction of Iraq's weapons. Divisions began to emerge among the major powers over the potential for huge financial gains to be made in a post-sanctions Iraq. The United States feared that lifting the sanctions and normalising relations would mean that other powers would reap the benefits from the exploitation of Iraq's high-quality, low-cost oil reserves—the second largest in the world.

The US was confronted with a deepening dilemma. On the one hand, it could not normalise relations with Iraq because the chief beneficiaries would be its economic rivals, including France and Russia, which already had oil contracts with the government. On the other hand, it was becoming increasingly difficult to continue with the sanctions regime. "Regime change" was the means to cut the Gordian knot.

In October 1998, the US Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, which provided nearly \$100 million for "democratic opposition organisations" to "establish a program to support a transition to democracy in Iraq". In other words, the policy of "regime change" was initiated under the Clinton administration.

The Republican Party platform for the 2000 election included the "full implementation" of the Iraq Liberation Act. From the very first days of the Bush administration, the question of an invasion of Iraq was under discussion. It was not possible to simply launch an invasion—there had to be a pretext.

The problems confronting American imperialism were set out in Zbigniew Brzezinski's book *The Grand Chessboard* published in 1997. It was difficult for the US to exercise its global dominance, he explained, because America was "too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad". The pursuit of power abroad was not a goal commanding popular passion, Brzezinski noted, "except in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public's sense of well-being".

The events of September 11, 2001 provided that threat. There are many unanswered questions about 9/11. Yet, one thing is not in doubt: it was the pretext for a war of global domination launched by the United States. The "war on terror," or the "long war" as it is now called in official Pentagon circles, is the framework within which the US is seeking to establish its hegemony, in the Middle East and internationally.

The explosive character of the present period essentially derives from the fact that the US is attempting to compensate for the decline in its global economic position by military means. This program has its own inexorable logic. The more deeply embroiled the US becomes in military conflict, the more it has to resort to the use of force, not so much because of military defeats, but, more often than not, to overcome problems created by its victories.

During the Gulf War, the *Wall Street Journal* coined the now infamous slogan "Force works". It has become the methodology of the Bush administration. As Frederick Engels explained so clearly, however, those who subscribe to the "force theory" of history are under the delusion that

political conditions determine the economic situation, and that political means, and eventually force, can be used to reshape fundamental economic conditions.

Consider the events in Iraq from this standpoint. The US military was able to conquer Iraq in a matter of a few days, with Bush proclaiming “mission accomplished” in May 2003. In those days, supporters of the Bush doctrine were proclaiming that the experience of the US occupation of Germany and Japan after World War II demonstrated that it would be possible to construct a viable democracy and a thriving economy in Iraq.

They left out one factor: the decline in the economic position of the United States in the intervening period. This meant that Washington’s economic program in Iraq was not based on the kind of economic reconstruction carried in Japan and Europe, but rather on looting, privatisation and massive payoffs to favoured American corporations, such as Halliburton.

The US economic program aimed not at improving, but worsening the conditions of the Iraqi population as it plundered the country. Thus its perspective for the creation of a puppet regime necessarily rested upon the old imperialist tactic of divide-and-rule—the creation of national and sectarian divisions.

The result is the eruption of a sectarian civil war and the formation of a government that precariously balances between Shiite political and religious organisations on the one hand, and the US military on the other. With the refusal of the Iraqi prime minister to denounce Hezbollah during the war in Lebanon, the discussion in the US administration is that it is necessary to look to a new strong man to take command.

At the same time, the logic of militarism continues to unfold. The inability to establish a viable puppet regime in Iraq means that the military intervention must be extended... on to Iran and Syria and the establishment, in that now infamous phrase of Condoleezza Rice, of a “new Middle East.”

The sphere of US military activity is not to be confined to that region, however. In the words of the Quadrennial Defense Review issued by the Pentagon in February: “The United States is a nation engaged in what will be a long war.” The scope of this war is the entire globe.

Under the heading “Shaping the Choices of Countries at Strategic Crossroads,” the review states: “The choices that major and emerging powers make will affect the future strategic position and freedom of action of the United States, its allies and partners. The United States will attempt to shape these choices in ways that foster cooperation and mutual security interests. At the same time, the United States, its allies and partners must also hedge against the possibility that a major or emerging power would choose a hostile path in the future.”

Some of the possible candidates have already been designated. The document refers to “the resurgence of populist authoritarian political movements in some countries, such as Venezuela,” that are a source of economic and political instability. Russia is described as a country in “transition”. While the US welcomes Moscow as a “constructive partner,” it views “with concern” actions that compromise the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of other states. No particular region is specified, but the document refers to the states of Central Asia, where “outside powers may seek to gain an influence” over the energy resources of the region.

China is singled out as having the “greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States”. Overall, the document calls for all “major and emerging powers” to be “integrated as constructive actors and stakeholders into the international system”. The framework of this international system, it goes without saying, is defined by the interests of the United States. That is, to put it more crudely, as Bush did, “you are either with us or against us”.

Where is the US “long war” going to lead? At a certain point, as the bloody history of the twentieth century demonstrates, it must bring about

a catastrophe. That history also demonstrates that this catastrophe cannot be averted by appealing to one or other of the imperialist powers, or organisations such as the United Nations, to ensure peace. During the Iraq war of 2003, the UN refused to take action against the aggression of the US, and when the invasion was over, sanctified the invasion. During the attack on the Lebanon, like its ill-fated predecessor, the League of Nations, in the 1930s, the UN simply stood aside as the US and Israel launched their war of destruction.

There is only one social force in the world that can put an end to militarism and war, and ensure genuine peace. That force is the international working class. In order to carry out this task, however, it must fight on an independent program. The foundation of this perspective is the recognition that the task is not one of trying to pressure this or that imperialist power, but of ending the capitalist system, based on private profit and the national state system, which is the source of war. This is the program of the SEP and our world party, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

In conclusion, let me contrast this program with the bankrupt perspective offered by the various radical and protest groups.

An article published in the *Green Left Weekly* of August 2 insisted that in order to keep up the expression of mass community opposition to the Howard government’s support for the Israeli aggression, more and bigger city-wide protests were needed. “If there was one main lesson from the campaign against the Iraq war, it was that one big protest rally, no matter how huge, is not enough.”

The protests against the invasion of Iraq—the largest demonstrations in history—revealed the global opposition to the war drive of the US and its allies. That opposition and anger has deepened in the succeeding three years. Yet, the experience of the Iraq war also made clear that any movement, no matter how large, is impotent without an independent perspective. The problem in 2003 was not that there was only one protest, but that the perspective of the demonstration was to pressure the United Nations, or one of the major powers, possibly France, to prevent the war.

During the attack on Lebanon, the appeal of the protest organisers was directed to the Howard government itself. An article by a member of the Stop the War Coalition published in the August 16 edition of the *Green Left Weekly* declared: “Shame on prime minister John Howard, ALP leader Kim Beazley and Victorian premier Steve Bracks for not publicly condemning the invasion of a sovereign country and the slaughter of its people.” It demanded the coalition government condemn Israeli aggression and break all ties with the Israeli state.

The article concluded by summing up the total bankruptcy of the protest perspective: “We need to keep mobilising public opposition to end this war. That, in the end is the only way to make Howard, George Bush, Tony Blair and Ehud Olmert listen.”

Consider the analysis that underlies such a perspective. It is that the essential problem lies in the individuals who occupy the leading posts in the various imperialist governments. The conclusion is that it is necessary to keep protesting until they listen or are replaced.

An altogether different conclusion flows from a scientific analysis, which understands that the drive to war arises not from the psyche or politics of individual imperialist politicians. It is rooted in processes at the very heart of the capitalist system itself. This analysis makes clear that the urgent task is the development of the political consciousness of the working class and the forging of a revolutionary movement based on the program of international socialism. It is to the realisation of this perspective that the work of the SEP and the ICFI is directed.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

