

Human rights propaganda in support of imperialist war

The Return of History, Conflict, Migration and Geopolitics in the 21st Century

By Roger Jordan
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The recently published book *The Return of History, Conflict, Migration and Geopolitics in the 21st Century* by academic Jennifer Welsh, which has been widely promoted by Canada's state-funded broadcaster, provides an indication of the mounting concern among so-called liberal sections of the ruling class about how to deal with the reemergence of imperialist conflicts and deepening social inequality. Based on human rights propaganda and a dishonest presentation of the virtues of international law, Welsh argues that the West, including Canadian imperialism, has to act more aggressively to defend its supposedly cherished liberal democratic values against terrorism and a resurgent Russia.

Welsh is a professor of international relations at Oxford University and, perhaps more significantly in the context of her latest volume, special adviser to the United Nations Secretary General on the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine. R2P was developed by an international commission in the early 2000s funded by the Canadian government and has served as the ideological justification for a series of US-led wars and military interventions, most prominently in Libya in 2011.

Welsh's central thesis is that the West, and above all the United States, has become too complacent about its position in the world and must more actively uphold "democracy" and other values in the face of new emerging challenges. She acknowledges that the capitalist triumphalism in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union proved to be overly optimistic. The world is not moving inexorably towards democratic capitalist uniformity, as so many ideologists predicted in the early 1990s, but is showing signs of a return to past conflicts and divisions. "If we continue to muddle along," Welsh writes, "lulled by the conviction that our model is best, that current challenges will ultimately not defeat us, and that everyone else in the world wants what we want, we will not be able to respond to an unforeseen shock or an emerging sign of decay."

Behind the rhetoric, Welsh's call for a more forceful upholding by the US of values such as "democracy" and "human rights" amounts to a plea for an even more aggressive assertion of its imperialist ambitions, as becomes clear throughout the book.

Welsh's views represent those of an important section of the ruling elite in Canada. Her book is all the more significant because it formed the basis for the Massey Lecture Series, an annual event broadcast by the state-funded Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in November. It is more than mere coincidence that Welsh was chosen to deliver the 2016 series, less than one year after the coming to power of a Liberal government in Ottawa committed to a repackaging of Canadian imperialist ambitions on the global stage behind a veil of propaganda about "human rights" and "democracy."

The refutation of Fukuyama's "End of History"

Francis Fukuyama summed up the wave of celebration that swept the capitalist class in the immediate post-Soviet period with his theory of the "end of history." His contention was that with the end of the Soviet Union, liberal capitalism no longer had a serious competitor and would thus become the natural economic, social and political system to which everyone would strive. History as Marx had understood it, as the history of class struggle, was over and Marxism and socialism were dead.

Even someone like Welsh, who praises Fukuyama and fondly recalls the early 1990s as a time when she and an entire layer of privileged academics saw their living standards rise as new opportunities opened up, is compelled to acknowledge that Fukuyama's theory has been refuted. "Our own liberal democratic society was not inevitable," she writes in chapter one, before going on to stress that such principles were fought for, above all, in the two imperialist world wars in the first half of the 20th century. The past few years have been "less like transitions" to a democratic capitalist order, as Fukuyama had predicted, and "more like the return of history."

With this remark, Welsh sums up her concerns about what she claims is an increasingly assertive Russia, mounting violations of international law, unprecedented numbers of refugees in the post-war era, and the substantial growth of social inequality. But despite acknowledging that 25 years after the dissolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union the capitalist system confronts a deepening crisis, she insists that no alternative exists. "We live in a society without genuine opposition, where even to imagine an alternative economic and political system seems futile," she asserts.

However, Welsh is troubled by the fraying of social relations in Western societies, which she views as an obstacle to pressing ahead as aggressively as possible with the assertion of the global imperialist interests of the US and Canada. She cites as her role model George Kennan, the US Cold War diplomat who advanced the idea of "containment" towards the Soviet Union. A key component of Kennan's strategy, under conditions of the post-war capitalist boom, was the strengthening of welfare state measures so as to secure a degree of social and political stability within the US and Western Europe to enable the imperialist powers to concentrate their full attention on confronting the Soviet Union and not a hostile challenge from below at home.

A dishonest cover-up of imperialist war crimes

Welsh's function as an apologist for the imperialist powers finds its clearest expression in her treatment of the role of the United States and its allies in the numerous wars they have waged over the past 25 years.

While at times advancing the mildest criticism of aspects of US foreign policy, she does so within a framework which accepts without question the bogus notion that Washington acts around the world to defend “human rights” and expand “democracy.”

She opens chapter two, on “The return of barbarism,” with a description of the apparently sudden emergence of Islamic State in the summer of 2014. She details the spread of the jihadist group’s control over large parts of Iraq and Syria as something that took the US by surprise and which could not have been foreseen. Having presented this false narrative, she proceeds to make a timid criticism of US policy in Iraq. While accepting wholesale the fraudulent propaganda of the Bush administration that it was bringing “democracy” to the Middle Eastern country, Welsh admonishes Washington for its failure to develop a post-conflict strategy.

The lack of a plan for Iraq resulted in the development of ethnic tensions, she continues. In this context, she notes that the US “unwittingly” assisted sectarianism with its policy of relying on Shia parties to rule in Baghdad while Sunnis were largely excluded.

This analysis is a complete distortion of the history. The reality is that Washington actively encouraged sectarian divisions in Iraq to maintain its control over the puppet government in Baghdad so as to secure access to Iraqi oil and retain its dominant geostrategic position in the energy-rich region. This policy gave rise to an Iraqi branch of Al-Qaida, which did not exist prior to 2003, among disaffected Sunnis, many of whom would later go on to form ISIS.

Any notion that Welsh is merely confused or inconsistent in her approach to the crimes of American imperialism is dashed by her descent into outright falsification of history. Her account of recent experiences with “humanitarian” interventions simply leaves out one of the most notorious—and for Welsh, given her own professional background, one of the most damning—the 2011 US-NATO war to topple the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

NATO launched thousands of bombing raids on the North African country, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands and the plunging of Libya into a vicious civil war. The NATO action was initiated under the pretext of R2P, with widely reported claims that Gaddafi’s forces were preparing to massacre civilians.

In fact, the NATO operation was carried out in violation of international law to support a collection of Islamist extremist militias, including many gunmen who were later funnelled into Syria with the assistance of the CIA to form the backbone of the Islamist opposition to the Assad regime. Important sections of this fighting force joined ISIS when it emerged. The US continued to see ISIS as an ally in the toppling of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and only moved to confront it as its control over wide swathes of Iraq threatened to destabilize Washington’s client regime in Baghdad.

There is no innocent explanation for Welsh’s deletion of the entire Libyan experience from the historical record. The United Nations, where she works as a senior adviser on R2P, played a critical role in providing legitimacy for the imperialist onslaught on Libya. A Security Council resolution denounced Gaddafi and explicitly referred to the R2P doctrine to sanction the measures taken by the US-led NATO operation. The only conclusion that can therefore be drawn is that she chose to omit the Libyan episode because it contradicts her depiction of Washington and its allies as opponents of Islamist terrorism, and crusaders for democracy and international law.

Her potted history of the fate of international law since World War II is extraordinarily obtuse. She avoids informing her readers that the key development in international law following the uncovering of the Nazis’ horrific crimes in 1945 was the conclusion, expressed in the Nuremberg trials, that the waging of aggressive war was the greatest of all crimes against humanity. To mention this fact would inevitably lead to the conclusion that the United States is the principle violator of international

law today as a consequence of its acts of aggression against countries from Yugoslavia in the late 1990s, to Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s and Libya and Syria in recent years.

Welsh prefers to focus her attention on the medieval concept of a “just war,” which represents a major regression from the principles laid down at Nuremberg. Just war theory accepts that conflicts will break out and merely requires that the participants provide an appropriate justification for launching them and adhere to basic standards of moral behaviour while engaged in them. Even by these standards, it would not be difficult to demonstrate Washington’s criminal role on the world stage, from the 2004 assault on Fallujah to its recent massacre of civilians in the bombing of Mosul. But Welsh devotes all of her efforts to identifying instances where US rivals such as Russia or Syria have violated such legal principles, leading her to the truly outrageous conclusion, “there is strong evidence that liberal democratic states have gone the furthest in actually implementing the legal commitments they signed onto” in the post-war period.

Claims of Russian “aggression”

Welsh’s book was published last fall at the height of the virulently anti-Russia campaign waged by a substantial sections of the US political and media establishment during the 2016 US presidential election campaign. The lurid claims of Russian interference in the election, none of which have been backed up with a shred of evidence, have been used to attack Donald Trump from the right and step up pressure for an intensification of Washington’s confrontational approach to Moscow, including the real possibility of all-out war.

Welsh supplies ideological ammunition for this reactionary campaign, which she seeks to conceal with phrases about human rights and democracy. According to Welsh, Russia has been the principal destabilizing force in world politics for decades.

The author is prepared to embrace any expression of opposition to Russia, even when it is associated with the most extreme right-wing forces. She uncritically hails the fascist-led coup in February 2014 in Ukraine, where protests in Kiev against pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovich were led by neo-Nazi forces like the Right Sector and Svoboda. The coup, triggered by Yanukovich’s refusal to sign an association agreement with the European Union, was aimed at bringing Ukraine into the Western sphere of influence and expanding the domination of the US and Germany over the country at Russia’s expense. For Welsh, this was only to be welcomed, as she enthused, “You could smell the scent of revolution in Kiev.”

In reality, the strongest scent emanating from the so-called opposition forces was the stench of Western dollars and euros. The US boasted about how it had invested billions of dollars to fund political groups opposed to Ukraine’s close ties to Russia, most infamously in the recorded telephone remarks of under-secretary of state for Europe Victoria Nuland.

The distortions reach new heights when Welsh turns to Syria. Russia is singled out for pursuing its own geostrategic and economic interests by intervening on the side of the Assad regime, Moscow’s main ally in the Middle East. By contrast, Welsh writes of the United States, “the US has drastically curtailed its global ambitions and its willingness to deploy its forces abroad.”

This false narrative is part of Welsh’s sustained effort to portray US imperialism and its European allies as essentially moral and humane actors, whose actions are always motivated by the greater good. By contrast, Russia and any country aligning with it seek to pursue only the basest and most self-interested goals.

The reality is, of course, very different. The Russian regime of Vladimir Putin, representing the interests of a criminal layer of billionaire oligarchs whose wealth was largely based on the theft of state property during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, offers no progressive alternative to

imperialism. In Ukraine, it encouraged pro-Russian separatism in the east of the country and in Syria it has propped up the Assad dictatorship with the aim of retaining its sole military base outside of the former Soviet Union and countering US efforts at regime change. This has only heightened the danger of the Syrian conflict spiraling out of control and exploding into a regional war that would rapidly bring the major powers into direct conflict.

But both of these initiatives are essentially defensive responses to the aggression of Western imperialism. For over a quarter century, the US has waged virtually uninterrupted wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, a fact which Welsh deliberately evades in her presentation. The suggestion that Washington has “drastically curtailed its world ambitions” would be news to the millions of Iraqis, Afghans and Syrians driven from their homes due to the destruction of their societies by US-led or US-incited wars, which have been responsible for the deaths of millions.

Welsh lends further credence to the anti-Russia campaign in the US by embracing wholesale the allegations of mass Russian spying on Western countries. On the other hand, the vast global spying network led by the American National Security Agency, which is gathering information on billions of people around the globe, does not even rate a mention. In this context, it is revealing that Welsh’s only reference to Edward Snowden, whose leaks exposed the true extent of Washington’s spying network, is to denounce him because his revelations allegedly made it easier for terrorist groups to encrypt their communications.

Welsh concludes her chapter on Russia by attempting to distance herself somewhat from the most hardline anti-Russian forces. Perhaps, she suggests, “Western hubris” may also have been partly to blame for the deterioration in relations. She proposes that a way be found to keep the door open for Russian “cooperation” with the US and its allies through negotiations and multi-lateral organizations. But, she insists, this can only be achieved if the US lays down strict guidelines which, if violated by Russia, will result in swift punishment. In essence, her talk of “cooperation” notwithstanding, Welsh’s appeal amounts to the suggestion that the Kremlin be given another chance to fully subordinate itself to US and European imperialism so as to avert a calamitous conflict that could trigger world war.

The fact that such explicitly anti-Russia positions were given an official forum by the CBC with its invitation to Welsh to deliver the Massey Lectures is of great political significance. Canada’s Liberal government has been one of the leading proponents of the international anti-Russia campaign. It has committed 450 Canadian troops to lead a NATO battalion to be deployed to Latvia as part of the US-led alliance’s attempt to encircle and menace Russia. In March, the Trudeau government also announced an extension of a military mission to Ukraine, where Canadian troops are training army and national guard units to wage war on pro-Russian separatists.

Planning to save capitalism from itself

The object of Welsh’s biggest fear remains unmentioned by name throughout the book: the working class. Her reference in the title to the return of history is a tacit admission that the class struggle, dismissed by Fukuyama and so many others as a relic of the past, is once again emerging on the surface of political life around the world.

This finds its sharpest expression in Welsh’s concluding chapter, where she discusses her concern at the growing levels of social inequality in Western society. This is not done, however, due to any objection in principle to significant levels of social inequality and class oppression, but rather because she fears that the levels it has reached are unsustainable and undermine the ability of the United States and its imperialist allies to pursue their global interests. As she notes, the failure to manage inequality within certain limits threatens to “breed grievances that can become revolutionary or violent.”

As well as once again invoking her hero Kennan, Welsh’s remedy for the current situation amounts to issuing appeals to the ruling class to recognize the error of its ways. This enters the realms of the absurd as she proposes the conducting of psychological interventions to assist would-be capitalist benefactors to increase their empathy for society and think less about personal gain and private profit. She also favourably quotes British “left” author Paul Mason, who has distinguished himself over recent months for his open embrace of the US-led war-mongering campaign aimed at Russia.

All of this is based on the promotion of Cold War liberalism, which is presented by Welsh as a peace-loving, democratic ideology. At various points she urges the United States and the West to reinvigorate their commitment to “liberal-democratic values,” while concealing entirely from the reader that such “values” have always been bound up with the ruthless assertion of US imperialist dominance throughout the world, from the Korean War to Vietnam, the CIA’s brutal interventions into Latin America, Africa and other parts of the world to install and prop up ruthless dictatorships, and the vast military deployment, including its huge nuclear arsenal, to confront the Soviet Union.

It is this legacy which Welsh is nostalgic for when she appeals for a reinvigoration of “liberal-democratic values.” The drastic expansion of militarism, which is being rapidly implemented by the Trump administration in the US and by virtually every other imperialist power around the globe, is not only aimed at preparing for the inevitable military conflicts that will arise between the major powers over markets and geostrategic control of key regions, but to suppress all opposition that will no less certainly emerge from the billions of working people who oppose the reckless drive to war.

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