

The US political crisis reaches fever pitch

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The political battle within the US ruling elite is reaching a new peak of intensity, with an ongoing media campaign portraying Trump as a Russian agent, Democratic Party demands to cancel the State of the Union address, and Trump's response Thursday afternoon, blocking a planned foreign trip by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that would have included a visit to US troops in Afghanistan.

While the anti-Russian campaign against Trump escalates, spearheaded by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, with nearly daily "exposés" depicting Trump as a puppet of Vladimir Putin, Trump answered with a fascistic rant against the supposed "radical left" takeover of the Democratic Party, delivered to a military audience at the Pentagon. "The party has been hijacked by the open borders fringe," he claimed.

The mutual vilification takes place under conditions of a partial shutdown of the federal government that will reach the one-month mark next Tuesday, with 800,000 federal workers going without paychecks. More than 300,000 are furloughed and nearly 500,000 are forced to work without pay.

The United States has clearly entered into a major political crisis, which cannot be reduced to the personalities involved, or the seeming accident of Trump's presidency. Like any significant political phenomenon, this crisis has deeper socioeconomic and material roots, which have produced an unprecedented degree of dysfunction in the US political system and disorientation in the ruling elite.

There are two main historical factors at work, one of them developing over many decades, the other of more recent origin.

The first is the absolute failure of the conceptions and policies adopted by the US ruling elite in response to the crisis and breakdown of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc as a whole. Beginning with the administration of George H. W. Bush, Washington was emboldened to use military force on a far wider scale than at any time since World War II.

Bush hailed the prospect for a "new world order" defined by American military supremacy, freed of the pressure from the Soviet Union that had set definite limits to US military intervention throughout the Cold War. He hoped to put an

end to the "Vietnam syndrome," the deep popular opposition to overseas military adventures after the debacle in Southeast Asia. Imperialist strategists called for seizing the "unipolar moment." Some even proclaimed the "end of history," and envisioned a long succession of American administrations dominating the world, like the emperors of ancient Rome.

But after 30 years of virtually unbroken military conflict—Desert Storm, Somalia, the Balkans, Panama, Haiti, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the bombing of Libya in 2011, the US-backed civil wars in Syria and Yemen—what is there to show for it? American bombs and missiles have wrought devastation over a vast expanse from North Africa to Central Asia, killing millions, displacing tens of millions, destroying entire societies.

But despite the expenditure of trillions of dollars, to say nothing of the human cost both at home and abroad, American imperialism is in a weaker position in the Middle East than before the first Persian Gulf war, while its main regional target, Iran, and its global antagonists in China and Russia have grown stronger. The relative economic decline of the US, particularly in relation to China, is a major factor in the United States' loss of global hegemony.

A recent analysis in the *National Interest* was headlined, "There is no Military Victory in Afghanistan." It came to the gloomy conclusion that "the Afghan national security forces (ANSF) and the kleptocratic Islamic republic they protect will not survive without generous Western aid," adding that these forces, "314,000 strong on paper, are unable to defeat a Taliban force less than a fifth their size" and are also "fiscally unsustainable," absorbing nearly the entire national income of Afghanistan.

A scathing analysis published last week by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a leading imperialist think tank, blasts the failure of both Republican and Democratic administrations to develop a viable strategy in the Persian Gulf region, particularly in relation to Iraq and Iran, while calling the current debate over Trump's call for a pullout of American forces from Syria a meaningless sideshow. The real problem, argues Anthony Cordesman of CSIS, is that Iraq is effectively bankrupt, unable to serve US

interests in the world oil market or maintain domestic stability.

Nor have Trump's efforts to shift the focus of US intervention from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region borne fruit. *Foreign Policy* magazine critiques the ongoing US naval engagements with China over the South China Sea as largely for show, provoking Beijing's anger while failing to reassure potential allies like the Philippines. "For all its tough talk on China and increased activity in the South China Sea, the Trump administration's credibility in Southeast Asia is eroding," the report concludes.

While the decline in the global position of American imperialism has been a protracted process, the second major factor underlying the political crisis in Washington is of more recent vintage: the growth of the class struggle and pro-socialist sentiment in the United States.

The most alarming aspect of the 2016 presidential campaign, as far as the US ruling elite was concerned, was not the election of Trump. He is one of them, and, media hysteria to the contrary, his class loyalty is not in doubt. What struck fear into both factions of the ruling elite, Democratic and Republican, was the revelation that there was mass support for socialism among a broad swathe of working people and youth, with more than 13 million votes cast for Bernie Sanders. The Vermont senator is not, of course, a genuine socialist, only a liberal who used socialist phrases to bolster his "left" credentials. The popular response, however, shocked the entire US ruling class and all its political representatives, including Sanders himself.

This has been followed, beginning in 2018, by an upsurge in the class struggle, with tens of thousands of teachers joining in statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, organized through social media and outside the unions, and a wave of other strikes and struggles by auto workers, public employees, utility and telecommunications workers. This is part of a broader radicalization of the working class internationally, a political awakening with revolutionary implications.

Both the failure of its long-term geopolitical strategy and the emergence of working class opposition at home have profoundly disoriented the American ruling elite. In the wake of US failures abroad, bitter recriminations have led to the hunt for scapegoats. The question of "Who lost China?" played a major role in the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s. The new McCarthyism of the Democratic Party poses the question "Who lost Syria?"

The eruption of significant class battles at home is even more disturbing, even terrifying, to the ruling class than setbacks abroad. Now it is a question of the most vital interests of the bourgeoisie, the defense of its wealth and property in the face of the developing challenge from below.

Each side within the ruling elite plays at pro-worker demagoguery, whether in the form of Trump's vicious immigrant-baiting, combined with trade war, or the Democrats' more traditional, but completely phony, posturing as the "friends of labor." But both factions are utterly hostile to any genuine assertion of the independent interests of the working class.

There is a mounting sense that neither bourgeois faction can find a way out of the current crisis, and that the answer has to come from the intervention of the working class. This realization produced a rare moment of truth on NBC News Thursday evening, when "Meet the Press" host Chuck Todd, asked how the federal government shutdown could be ended, said that the only thing that could force the opposing camps to abandon their posturing would be an all-out strike by TSA passenger screeners and air traffic controllers, which would close down the entire air travel system.

The emergence of the working class is fundamental to changing the political situation, not only in the United States, but throughout the world. One year ago, in a commentary on the beginning of the year 2018, WSWS Editorial Board Chairman David North wrote: "This new year of 2018—the bicentenary of Marx's birth—will be characterized, above all, by an immense intensification of social tensions and an escalation of class conflict around the world." This assessment has already been vindicated in the events of the past year. Going forward, the central task facing the working class is the building of a new revolutionary leadership, committed to the struggle for a socialist perspective.

The bicentenary of Marx's birth, socialism and the resurgence of the international class struggle
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