

A Juggernaut without Brakes: American Militarism Drives On

*by Andrew Lichterman**

Fifteen years after the end of the Cold War, the United States is in the grips of resurgent militarism, initiating wars and spending whatever it takes to achieve global military dominance. Mainstream discussion is limited largely to how wars should be fought, and what the best mix of weapons is to fight them.

Many progressive people in the U.S. and world wide hoped that the 2004 presidential campaign would be a referendum on the Iraq war and the broader U.S. turn towards aggression abroad and repression at home. The nomination of John Kerry, who voted to authorize the Iraq war and has yet to make a clear statement against it, from the beginning manifested obeisance to the military as an unquestionable and sacred institution. Many who might have preferred an anti-war candidate nonetheless voted to nominate Kerry in the hopes that his Vietnam military service and his mainstream voting record on military matters would somehow neutralize the militarist nationalism central to the Bush administration's consolidation of power in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks. The Democratic convention, the forum traditionally used to frame presidential campaign themes, was carefully crafted to march the Party to the front of the military parade, its focus-group-tested script climaxed by candidate Kerry "reporting for duty." In the absence of clearly defined differences on the Iraq war, the election was conducted by the major players as a morality play of personalities and patriotism, a debate centered on who could best lead a nation in its wars, rather than about who might help to turn the country towards peace.

On issues of war and peace, the election decided little. George W. Bush won, but enters his second term as an unpopular President managing an unpopular war. Neither the Iraq war nor Bush garner majority support today in opinion polls, the latter unusual for an American president in the opening months of a second term. Despite this, it is hard to imagine what events or forces, internal or external, would cause a significant change in U.S. foreign and military policy in the near term. Elected officials from both parties, with the exception of a few relatively marginal Democrats, remain silent about the aggressive and hence illegal character of the Iraq war and occupation.¹ Prominent "opposition" legislators remain far more likely to criticize the Administration for sending too few troops to war with inadequate equipment than to question the legality, or even the wisdom, of the war itself.

Military spending is at or above Cold War peaks in absolute terms, continuing an upward swing that accelerated after the September 11 attacks but that was already underway in the late 1990's under Clinton.² Many of the high-tech weapons programs which now attract some opposition, ranging from nuclear weapons with new capabilities to missile defenses and new kinds of weapons intended to operate through or from space, already were in progress during the 90's, although with less funding.³ National security elites of both major parties were ready and waiting to fund most of these programs at higher levels given the opportunity presented by 9-11 (although there was some debate over particular programs, such as mid-course ballistic missile defenses). The National Security Advisory Group, assembled by the Senate Democratic party leadership and consisting of much of the Clinton Administration national security team, noted that

“In the wake of devastating attacks on our homeland, Americans were ready to support dramatic increases in defense spending. These increases are needed and should be supported. They create an historic opportunity for true transformation— an opportunity that we should seize.” The same group credited the Clinton administration for its role in developing military systems that “played a key role in defeating in a matter of days Iraq's sizable military forces.”⁴

Across the spectrum of mainstream U.S. political elites, the post-Cold War period was seen not as a time to demobilize and disarm, but rather as an opportunity to achieve military preeminence on an unprecedented scale. It was under President Clinton, not President Bush I or II, that the U.S. military proclaimed as its goal “the ability to rapidly project power worldwide in order to achieve full spectrum dominance.”⁵ After what in retrospect can be seen as a brief period of ideological disarray during the early 1990's, the sci-tech-military-industrial complex successfully repackaged most of the immense Cold War arsenal under the rubric of “counterproliferation” of “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD). In the latter half of the 1990's, the U.S. conducted a propaganda campaign aimed at equating chemical and biological weapons with nuclear weapons in the public mind, creating a heightened sense of threat that helped to rationalize the retention of a vast U.S. nuclear arsenal, a renewed high-tech weapons buildup, and an increasingly aggressive global military stance.

Throughout this period, the United States did far more than refining weapons and reformulating doctrines. It fought wars large and small, wars increasingly resembling the efforts of European powers after World War I to maintain their imperial frontiers on the cheap with superior technology, with biplanes and machine guns replaced by cruise missiles, jet aircraft, and “precision” bombing. The 1999 Kosovo War allowed a further expansion of the U.S. “forward presence” on the virgin terrain of the old East Bloc. Military cooperation agreements were quietly made with ex-Soviet republics in Central Asia, where U.S. multinationals were in a race to exploit oil resources in the Caspian Basin. After 9-11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, these relationships blossomed into long-term bases in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as well as Afghanistan itself.⁶

The high-tech version of low-intensity warfare conducted against Iraq during the 90's, years of “no fly zone” enforcement punctuated by intensive rounds of bombing and cruise missile attacks portrayed as “containment” of Iraq’s alleged WMD programs, both necessitated and was used to justify a massive, permanent U.S. military presence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, accompanied by new additions to the U.S. “empire of bases” throughout the region. The New York Times, a reliable purveyor of mainstream national security thought, in 1998 provided a surprisingly frank discussion of WMD threats as propaganda. They appeared to approve using such a propaganda tactic, even if that was all it was, to whip up the climate of fear and hate needed to justify military action:

“When Clinton talks of the horrors of biological warfare and the danger that “our children” be exposed to it, he knows he is wielding a potent propaganda weapon....

Whatever the real importance of U.S. concerns about biological weaponry, in a way Clinton has already trumped Saddam. By painting Saddam as the agent who could unleash

such warfare on the world, the Americans have been using the threat rather effectively in recent days to build a case for attacking him with more conventional ordinance.

In addition to moral outrage, after all, the confrontation with Iraq is a head-on collision of major U.S. interests with a particularly murderous dictator.

Beyond the destruction of chemical and biological weapons, an eventual bombing campaign would serve several long-term U.S. interests in the region: the maintenance of a weak Iraq, but one not so weak that it will disintegrate; the reinforcement of the conservative gulf regimes and cheap supplies of oil; the maintenance of a rough balance of power between Iraq and Iran.”⁷

Both the ascendance of the Bush II Administration and the 9-11 attacks still are widely perceived in the United States as events that drastically changed the course we were on. But it is perhaps better to ask what the Bush regime and its ability to bring the nation to war, not only against Afghanistan but Iraq, reveal about power relations in the United States. Against a broader backdrop, the 9-11 attacks appear only to have further lowered constraints on elements in U.S. society long bent on the elimination of obstacles to the unfettered accumulation of wealth, and on the enlistment of the world’s most powerful state to assure “open markets” and “access to resources” on the most profitable terms, at the point of a cruise missile if necessary.

The current administration may not have gone to war mainly for oil. They may perhaps have gone as well in pursuit of an ideological vision, a notion that they could “democratize” Southwest Asia and the Middle East (although their notion of “democracy” has less to do with empowering ordinary people than with opening new parts of the world to corporate investment). They could not, however, have gone to war in the Persian Gulf without decades of U.S. commitment to building a vast military infrastructure capable of supporting war making there. And that infrastructure—bases, pre-positioned equipment, and logistical capacity designed to project forces globally—was built over decades under both Democratic and Republican Congresses and presidents mainly to maintain control of the world’s largest oil reserves, in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.⁸

And just as Bush could not have had his wars without the enormous military machine put in place over half a century, so he would not have been there to order them but for a political system increasingly dominated by the concentrated economic interests of oil, the military, and the military contractors. The Bush dynasty is a representative product of this system— a family that accumulated money and power by investing and trading in oil, weapons, and influence concerning oil and weapons, and by moving back and forth between business and government in a self-reinforcing upward spiral of influence, power, and profit.

Hannah Arendt noted that with imperialism there emerged a “new class” of “state-employed administrators of violence,” who, “although their field of activity was far away from the mother country, wielded an important influence on the body politic back home.” “Since they were nothing but functionaries of violence,” wrote Arendt, “they could only think in terms of power politics.” What was distinctive about this class and its political philosophy was not its emphasis on violence and power as tools of politics, but the fact that “neither had ever before been the

conscious aim of the body politic or the ultimate goal of any definite policy.”⁹

The regime now in power in the United States appears to be nothing more—or less— than the “state-employed administrators of violence” securing their rulership, in alliance with the corporate sectors most directly served by an aggressive U.S. military stance. More and more top “civilian” posts are occupied either by ex-military men or executives of military contractors. The top Bush Administration positions in the “civilian” foreign policy branch, the State Department, are occupied by Colin Powell, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Richard Armitage, a Reagan-era Defense Department official. Vice President Dick Cheney, considered by many to be the most powerful figure in the administration, laid the plans for the privatization of military functions for profit as Defense Secretary under Bush I, and spent his years between Bushes in the “private sector” preparing the Halliburton Corporation, a major purveyor of both oil and military services, to be a prime beneficiary. And their goal, as declared in the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, is indeed the endless accumulation of power through violence, of maintaining forever forces “strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”¹⁰

Arendt also noted the resentment of the “functionaries of violence” towards the political classes at home that preferred neither to admit to nor openly endorse the systematic brutality inherent in subjecting entire populations to foreign rule, but remained willing to accept the fruits of empire.¹¹ So we find Winston Churchill professing to be “extremely shocked” as his policy of replacing troops on the ground with air power results in the machine-gunning of women and children from above in 1920's Baghdad,¹² and round after round of torture, massacres, and “collateral damage” from Vietnam to Iraq dismissed as aberrations, and blamed on those who went to war rather than on those who sent them.

Since Vietnam, those who profit from the permanent war economy and their propagandists have astutely turned such resentments into a patriotic narrative of just wars and valiant warriors who were undercut by decadent political elites unwilling to face up to the unpleasant realities of global power. The soldiers always are placed in the front rank, largely obscuring the role of those who accumulate wealth and power through the administration of imperial adventures and the dispensation of their spoils. Both reinforced by and reinforcing broader Cold War themes, this narrative helped the military industrial complex to recover quickly from the ideological and economic after effects of the Vietnam war, rising to new heights less than a decade later with the Reagan-era military buildup.

Like all successful ideologies, this narrative worked because it contained elements of truth. No significant political faction in the U.S. mainstream has been willing to suggest that American wars may be fought for unjust reasons; debate remains limited to how to fight wars with the least “collateral damage,” or at most to which wars to fight. Even those among the wealthy and powerful in the United States who do not profit directly from war and weapons have been willing to avert their eyes from the realities of creating a ‘climate suitable for investment’ in an ever-larger portion of the planet, and have acceded to the construction of a military-technological-industrial complex that has become a political power unto itself, a virtual state within a state.

Corporate capitalist elites that practice the less directly violent forms of what David Harvey has called “accumulation by dispossession,” such as bankrupting entire societies through cycles of loan dependency, currency manipulation, and asymmetrical trade and investment may now find, ironically, that the ascendancy of the rougher imperial classes interferes with their preferred forms of profit-making.¹³ But they can hardly be surprised that this hour has come round at last.

There is no reason to expect the consequences to be rational from any particular perspective; once set loose the imperialist dynamic tends towards total destruction. “For power left to itself,” as Arendt warned, “can achieve nothing but more power, and violence administered for power’s (and not for law’s) sake turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate.”¹⁴

Coherent political opposition to an imperialist regime requires that it be named and discussed as such. But analysis of imperialism as an extreme expression of capitalism’s systemic drive to seek new sources of profit remains a taboo subject in the U.S., confined to marginalized discourses in a few university departments and activist groups (although it has recently become fashionable in the mainstream to talk about American Empire as either an unavoidable necessity or a positive responsibility).

The activist and academic discourses about imperialism each in their own way remain insular and abstract. Activist groups seldom get beyond sloganeering for lack of institutional resources for research or time for reflection. University intellectuals have time and resources for research and reflection, but seldom are engaged in day to day organizing efforts. They are not well positioned to produce the kind of analysis, focused on the effects of the dynamics of larger structures on the places where people live, work, and organize, that are needed to help form strategies for social change. This remains true despite several decades of “post-modern” academic discourses purportedly focused on the micro-politics of everyday life, discourses which from an activist standpoint often appear peculiarly hermetic, offering little that informs our everyday work. At the same time, activist communities in the United States have shown little interest in creating intellectual institutions of their own. Rank and file activists are left susceptible either to conspiracy theory driven fads or to re-integration into mainstream electoral politics and conventional interest-group lobbying campaigns in ways that leave existing economic relations and political power structures largely unchallenged.

In the United States, there is a pressing need for an intellectual as well as a political revival, one grounded outside the institutions of the dominant order, in the still-fragmentary social movements willing to confront the behemoth from within. As E.P. Thompson wrote two decades ago, in a very different world that in important ways remains unchanged, “We are trying to construct, out of the collapse of earlier traditions, a new internationalist constituency and one capable of acting urgently and with effect. We cannot write our recipes at leisure in the drawing room and pass them on to the servants’ hall (although some try to do that still). We must improvise our recipes as we sweat before the kitchen fires.”¹⁵

*Andrew Lichterman is a long-time peace and environmental activist in the San Francisco Bay

region of California, and is Program Director of the Western States Legal Foundation. He can be contacted at <http://www.al.marginalnotes.org>

Notes

1. See A. Lichterman and J. Burroughs, *War Is Not the Path to Peace: The United States, Iraq, and the Need for Stronger International Legal Standards to Prevent War*, Lawyers' Committee on Nuclear Policy and Western States Legal Foundation, October, 2002 <http://www.wslfweb.org/docs/iraqlaw2.htm>
 2. See Congressional Budget Office, "The Long-Term Implications of Current Defense Plans: Detailed Update for Fiscal Year 2005," September 2004, and Office of the under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2005* ("Green Book"), March 2004, table 7-2, pp.206 et seq
 3. For an overview of some of these programs at the end of the Clinton years, see Andrew Lichterman, *Looking for New Ways to Use Nuclear Weapons: U.S. Counterproliferation Programs, Weapons Effects Research, and "Mini-Nuke" Development*, Western States Legal Foundation Information Bulletin, Winter 2000-2001 <http://www.wslfweb.org/docs/mininuke.pdf>
 4. *An American Security Policy: Challenge, Opportunity, Commitment*, National Security Advisory Group, July 2003, pp.41, 1.
 5. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Vision 2020* (2000), p.6.
 6. On the past and present reach of the U.S. "Empire of Bases," see Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).
 7. Roger Cohen, "The Weapon Too Terrible for the Parade of Horribles," *The New York Times*, February 8, 1998 (internet edition).
 8. "The theater strategy succeeds in overcoming time and distance dilemmas by creating near-continuous presence of American forces through limited forward presence, ambitious combined exercises, and focused security assistance programs. While in the region, these forces deter aggression and create immediate capabilities to respond to crises. Power projection capabilities of America's armed forces enable deployment of larger forces able to fight and win in a major theater war. These strategic pillars are underwritten by a high state of readiness to fight and win against threats that span the conflict continuum.
- While threatened, America's vital interests in the region are clear and compelling. The unrestricted flow of petroleum resources from friendly Gulf states to refineries and processing facilities around the industrialized world drives the global economic engine. That flow depends on freedom of navigation through critical maritime choke points and the security of regional friends." *U.S. Central Command Posture Statement*, 1997.
9. Hannah Arendt, *Imperialism* (San Diego: HBJ/Harvest, 1968) p.17
 10. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2002, p.30.
 11. Arendt, *Imperialism*, pp. 12-14.
 12. Quoted in Sven Lindquist, *A History of Bombing*, (New York: The New Press, 2000), p.43.
 13. See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, (Oxford University Press, 2003).

14. Arendt, *Imperialism*, p.17.

15. E.P Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1985) p.151.