

# What would be the consequences of a US declaration of war on Yugoslavia?

Martin McLaughlin  
15 April 1999

A number of American congressmen and media spokesmen have raised the possibility of a formal declaration of war by the United States on Yugoslavia. The *Wall Street Journal* called for adoption of a declaration of war by Congress in its lead editorial on Tuesday, April 13.

In response to the demand raised by Congressman Tom Campbell (R-CA), who claims to oppose US bombing of Yugoslavia, House Speaker Dennis Hastert suggested that he was open to scheduling a vote on a declaration of war before the end of April. Under the War Powers Act of 1973, Congress has until early May to approve a declaration of war, pass a resolution authorizing the current bombing campaign or vote for complete withdrawal of American military forces from the region.

The advocates of a speedy vote on a declaration of war have given arguments that relate exclusively to the conduct of military operations in the Balkans. The *Journal*, in keeping with its creed of "America über alles," wants such a congressional vote to force Clinton to wage war more aggressively, with the goal of driving Slobodan Milosevic out of power and establishing a US protectorate over the whole of Serbia.

Congressional Republicans are sharply divided, with some favoring an all-out invasion of Serbia with ground troops, and others, like Campbell, who expects a declaration of war to be defeated, opposing Clinton's intervention in Yugoslavia as a diversion from more fundamental American foreign policy interests elsewhere, especially in Asia.

Neither the *Journal*, the Republican Congress nor the Clinton administration itself have publicly commented on the most ominous consequences of a formal declaration of war: the likely outlawing of public political opposition to the US-NATO bombing

campaign.

It has been nearly 60 years since the last declaration of war by the United States, the resolutions passed by Congress against Japan, Germany and their allies in World War II, adopted after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. None of the multitude of wars waged by American imperialism during the post-World War II period was conducted by means of a declaration of war.

There are many historical reasons for this, not the least being the tendency to unilateral presidential dictation of military and foreign policy and the lack of broad public support for the commitment of large numbers of American ground troops in Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf.

The most fundamental reason, however, was the desire to avoid the type of all-out social mobilization which had been required in World War II, which the American ruling class feared, with good reason, could lead to the eruption of social antagonisms at home.

Thus Lyndon Johnson refused repeated entreaties from the Pentagon to call up reserve units during the Vietnam War, concerned that the spectacle of older married men with children, rather than young conscripts, being killed and mutilated in southeast Asia would inflame the swelling public opposition to the war.

A declaration of war would create a very different legal framework within the United States than that which prevailed during the Vietnam War, when massive antiwar demonstrations took place regularly in the US capital and other cities. It would mean a sharp curtailment of democratic rights and civil liberties, the imposition of military censorship on the press, and political and physical repression of dissenting views.

One has only to look back at the regime imposed

during World War II, the last time America was engaged in an officially declared war. Despite the absence of any broad political opposition to the world war, the Roosevelt administration carried out the most flagrant and widespread abuses of civil liberties in 20th century US history.

More than 100,000 Japanese-Americans were rounded up and placed in concentration camps in the Mohave Desert of California and at other remote locations. Many of them were small farmers and shopkeepers who were robbed of their property and confined until the end of the war. It was more than 40 years before the US government offered an apology and token compensation to the surviving victims of this ordeal.

The relatively small groups which publicly opposed the war, on the basis of socialist or pacifist views, were persecuted, and their publications were banned from the mails and virtually suppressed. The central leadership of the Socialist Workers Party, then the Trotskyist movement in the United States, was put on trial for its political beliefs and imprisoned.

For the working class as a whole, World War II meant the abolition of the right to strike, with constant threats to jail workers who sought to defend their jobs and living standards, or whose actions threatened to disrupt the war machine.

There has been no public discussion of what a return to such methods of internal repression would mean for the America of 1999, where there is no broad popular support for military action, and where the social antagonisms, above all the gulf between the wealthy elite and the rest of the people, have grown to an extraordinary intensity.

But there is no doubt that this issue has been intensively studied by the Pentagon, where the officer corps has long blamed its defeat in Vietnam on the ability of the protest movement at home to campaign openly against the war among the American people.

In the 1980s, when the Reagan administration was preparing for outright US military intervention in Central America, a top-secret group of National Security Council staffers, headed by Lt. Col. Oliver North--later at the center of the Iran-Contra affair--drafted contingency plans for rounding up 300,000 Central American immigrants and political opponents of US intervention in that region, using

mothballed army bases as concentration camps.

It is worth noting, moreover, that the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, William Rehnquist, recently authored a volume on the subject of the fate of civil liberties in wartime. His attitude on the issue is suggested by the book's title, *All the Laws but One*, (i.e., in wartime, there is only room for one imperative, military necessity).

In his final chapter, after defending the roundup of Japanese-Americans in World War II, Rehnquist concludes, "There is no reason to think that future wartime presidents will act differently from Lincoln, Wilson, or Roosevelt, or that future justices of the Supreme Court will decide questions differently from their predecessors... It is neither desirable nor is it remotely likely that civil liberty will occupy as favored a position in wartime as it does in peacetime."

Coming as it does from the highest authority in the US judicial system, Rehnquist's book and his conclusion both suggest that unpublicized discussions within ruling circles about the domestic consequences of a major US war have gone much further than those which have appeared so far in the mass media.



To contact the WSWP and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wswp.org/contact](http://wswp.org/contact)**