

US propagandists invoke the Cold War

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The Bush administration and its media apologists have repeatedly compared the foreign and domestic measures that are being carried out under the mantle of a “war against terrorism” to the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Earlier this month, on the eve of a visit to the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld sounded this theme. “It undoubtedly will prove to be a lot more like a cold war than a hot war,” he said.

The Cold War, he continued, “did not involve major battles, it involved continuous pressure, it involved cooperation by a host of nations, it involved the willingness of populations in many countries to invest in it and to sustain it. And when it ended, it ended not with a bang, but through internal collapse, and the support for that way of life and that threat to the world just disintegrated from inside.”

Asked if the present conflict might span decades, like the Cold War, which occupied most of the latter half of the twentieth century, Rumsfeld replied, “I have no idea.”

This comparison involves a gross distortion of history, as well as a falsification of the aims and methods that underlie the current military offensive. The Bush administration is promoting a myth about the Cold War to provide a new rationalization for pursuing the geopolitical and economic interests of American capitalism. At the same time, the US ruling elite hopes to utilize the specter of global terrorism as a new external peril, supplanting the Soviet “red” menace, in order to forge a political consensus domestically behind its reactionary social agenda and militaristic foreign policy.

Government officials, media pundits and academics are all involved in this effort to refashion yesterday’s anticommunist ideology to serve the interests of American imperialism in the post-Soviet world. A notable example was a column that appeared in the October 6 *New York Times* headlined “The 40-Year War.”

The commentary was written by Bill Keller, the newspaper’s former Moscow correspondent, who is now one of its senior editors. Keller cited John Lewis Gaddis, the “dean of Cold-War studies”:

“Communism in the 1950s, Professor Gaddis points out, was seen not as a rival state but as a fearsome, state-sponsored conspiracy, one that threatened us from within as well as externally. The American response was ‘containment,’ a kind of global gopher hunt aimed at countering Communist influence wherever it surfaced, using diplomacy and economic power and armed proxies more often than American military might.”

Keller continued: “Like the Cold War, this one, while it lasts, will assert a gravitational pull on everything. It will determine who our friends are, revise our priorities and test the elasticity of our ideals.”

What was the Cold War, and what is its real relationship to the war in Afghanistan?

In essence, the Cold War was a global struggle led by Washington against the threat posed by social revolution to American capitalism’s international interests. It began in the aftermath of the Second World War. Its roots, however, can be traced back to 1918, when the US military comprised a major component of the imperialist expeditionary forces sent into Russia in an attempt to strangle the fledgling Soviet state. This

imperialist offensive was aimed at restoring capitalism to Russia and countering the enormous attraction that the first socialist revolution held for workers and intellectuals all over the world.

While the intervention was defeated, the unrelenting pressure of imperialism on the isolated Soviet state led to the growth of a privileged bureaucracy and a sharp turn to the right in the domestic and international policy of the ruling party. Washington welcomed this rightward shift. It extended recognition to the Soviet Union in 1933 and entered into a wartime alliance against Nazi Germany with the Stalinist regime in the Kremlin, which by then had exterminated the leadership of the 1917 revolution in mass purges and frame-up trials.

At the end of the Second World War, US foreign policy underwent a sharp shift. The Truman administration proclaimed its policy as one of “containment” of the Soviet Union and global struggle against the “spread of communism.” Washington utilized the police-state methods of Stalinism in the USSR and Eastern Europe to portray its imperialist policy as a fight for democracy and freedom against tyranny and oppression.

The claim that America’s Cold War policy was a response to “Soviet aggression” was ideological nonsense. The USSR under Stalin had long ago abandoned its support for revolution. It established its hegemony in the Eastern European territories it conquered from Nazi Germany, creating so-called “buffer states,” as a defensive measure to shield it from future invasion by the West. This was done with imperialist acquiescence, in part to stabilize a region that had long been a cauldron of social and national upheavals. To the extent that the Soviet bureaucracy gave limited support to nationalist movements in other regions, it did so to further its own national defense.

Stripped of its propaganda veneer, the essential content of Washington’s Cold War policy was a very aggressive response to the rising threat of revolution in the colonial countries and, even more threatening, in war-shattered Western Europe and Asia, where militant and socialist-minded labor movements went onto the offensive as the war came to an end. In the US as well, the specter of social revolution haunted the bourgeoisie, which faced an unprecedented wave of strikes in 1945 and 1946.

Far from a struggle for freedom, the Cold War policy was characterized by military violence and repression. Much of the conflict was fought out in the world’s most oppressed countries. In Korea and Vietnam, it involved failed US wars that cost the lives of tens of thousands of American soldiers and millions of Asian workers and peasants.

It also involved covert operations aimed at overthrowing leftist regimes and installing pro-US dictatorships. In Guatemala in 1954 the US Central Intelligence Agency organized a military coup against the Arbenz government, which had dared to challenge the hegemony of the United Fruit Company. Similarly, Washington backed the Shah in overthrowing the left-nationalist regime of Mossadegh in Iran. There, American oil companies saw in Mossadegh’s populist reform program a threat to their profit interests.

In both countries, US-backed police-state regimes were installed that jailed, tortured and murdered hundreds of thousands of workers, peasants and intellectuals. Washington justified these interventions in the name of stopping “communist expansion.”

Over the course of the next four decades, successive American administrations organized the assassination of popular nationalist leaders like Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, directed bloody military coups such as the overthrow of the Sukarno regime in Indonesia, where some one million people were slaughtered, and imposed military dictatorships throughout South America. Through the 1980s, Washington sponsored wars of terrorist intervention and state repression in Nicaragua and El Salvador that claimed the lives of tens of thousands more.

At home, the Cold War was inaugurated with a campaign of state repression and intimidation that saw the arrest of hundreds and the blacklisting of thousands, particularly in the arts. Its legacy was a stultification of intellectual and artistic development that casts a shadow over American political and cultural life to this day.

Nowhere was this witch-hunt more thorough than within the bureaucratized trade union movement. The AFL-CIO hierarchy worked as an arm of the government, rooting out left-wing militants and engaging in the crudest anticommunism. The end result was the most politically bankrupt and impotent labor organization in the world.

The driving force behind the Cold War was US imperialism's striving for world dominance. Notwithstanding its Stalinist degeneration, the USSR was a significant obstacle to the hegemonic aspirations of the American ruling elite. Washington was compelled to take into account the danger that its military interventions could meet with a Soviet reaction.

Paradoxically, the Cold War also compelled the US government to implement limited social reforms at home. The Soviet Union, despite the depredations of the Stalinist bureaucracy, still embodied in a distorted way the aims of social revolution, particularly in the nationalized property relations that held the potential for a rationally planned economy based on social need, rather than private profit. Hence, Washington was compelled to compete with the USSR ideologically as well as politically and militarily. Racial segregation, for example, became untenable in the 1960s as the US sought to portray itself as the champion of democracy in Africa and Asia.

The present attitude of the American ruling elite to social reforms provides one of the clearest refutations of the supposed parallel between Washington's "war on terrorism" and the Cold War. None of those who are invoking the Cold War to justify the war in Afghanistan are suggesting that any similar social concessions are on the agenda today. On every side, austerity and sacrifice are demanded of the working class.

From a historical and political standpoint, the analogy between Bush's "war on terrorism" and the Cold War is riddled with contradictions and absurdities. The Soviet state possessed the largest military force on the planet and a vast nuclear arsenal. Osama bin Laden leads his terrorist network from a cave in Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries on earth.

To the extent that the Soviet Union was still a pole of attraction for millions around the globe, it was because of its revolutionary origins and its promise of a new, more advanced form of society. The party that led the Russian Revolution was militantly secular and based itself on the most advanced intellectual achievements of the modern era. Can one seriously compare such a movement with the religious fundamentalism of bin Laden, which seeks the resurrection of a medieval Islamic state?

If a parallel can be said to exist between the Cold War and the new eruption of US militarism, it is this: Bush's "war on terrorism" entails a revival of the Cold War methods of military coup, assassination and mass slaughter that were utilized by American imperialism, particularly in the former colonial and oppressed countries, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Along with this violent and aggressive international agenda, it entails a return to McCarthyism and the utilization of the FBI as a political police apparatus to suppress those who oppose the foreign and domestic policy of the ruling elite. Then as now, these methods are employed not to stem some external aggression, but to pursue US economic and geopolitical aims.

The new military assault launched by Washington in the name of a "war on terrorism" will not resolve the profound and explosive contradictions that are the legacy of the Cold War. The Soviet Union's collapse has removed barriers to the exploitation of vast resources that were formerly off limits to US capitalism, particularly the huge oil and natural gas reserves of Central Asia, where Washington is now deploying its military forces.

Yet the end of the USSR has also lifted the Cold War constraints on conflicts between the US and its economic rivals in Western Europe and Japan. These rivals, once united behind Washington in the conflict with Moscow, have their own ambitions in the former Soviet Union and Central Asia. Their present declarations of unity with Washington notwithstanding, these powers cannot sit idly by as the US uses military force to impose its economic and political hegemony.

In this sense, the present conflict resembles not so much the Cold War, as the periods of mounting inter-imperialist tension and volatility that preceded the First and Second World Wars, when local and regional disputes paved the way for conflagrations and revolutionary upheavals on an international scale.

The attempt to forge a national consensus around a global campaign against "terrorism" cannot mask the acute contradictions within the US itself, exacerbated by a social polarization that grows more acute as the economy sinks deeper into slump. Unlike the period of the Cold War, there will be no social concessions at home to accompany war abroad. All bourgeois economists agree that guns and butter are out of the question for American capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Sustained popular support for US military aggression is precluded. Events will make it increasingly clear that the new eruption of American militarism is aimed at furthering the profit interests of an economic elite at the expense of the broad mass of working people. The attempt to dictate ideological conformity and impose material sacrifices under these conditions can only produce an intensification of class conflict in the US, as it provokes new upheavals internationally.



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