

Bush speaks at West Point: from containment to “rollback”

Bill Van Auken, David North
4 June 2002

In a speech delivered June 1 to graduating cadets at the US Military Academy at West Point, George W. Bush asserted his administration's intention to carry out preemptive military attacks wherever it perceives a challenge to America's global interests.

“Our security will require transforming the military you will lead. A military that must be ready to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world,” Bush told the newly minted army officers. “And our security will require all Americans to be forward looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.”

He went on to state that Washington is currently investigating 60 countries that could be attacked without warning because of the alleged existence of terrorist cells.

The policy spelled out before the army's corps of cadets goes even further than that enunciated by Bush in his State of the Union speech last January, when he vowed unrelenting and permanent war against a so-called “axis of evil.”

In its most immediate implications, the speech pointed to the administration's determination to proceed with plans for an invasion of Iraq. The remarks at West Point constituted the first major address by the US president since his return from a European tour in which he faced unconcealed skepticism about US aims. The speech had the character of a slap in the face to European governments that questioned Washington's militarist agenda, and, in particular, the preparations for a military intervention to remove the regime in Baghdad.

The implications of the speech, however, go much further, signaling a historic shift in US foreign policy that is pregnant with catastrophic implications for the people of the United States and the entire world.

For weeks, administration officials have sounded a drumbeat of warnings that further terrorist attacks are inevitable, threatening a massive loss of life on US soil. Even if one accepts these lurid warnings as legitimate and discounts the obvious connection between their issuance and the administration's desire to divert attention from mounting revelations of government lies concerning September 11, it does not follow that the only possible response is preemptive military action. Rather, the path being taken by the administration is the culmination of a protracted turn by the US ruling elite toward reliance on military force as the solution to all challenges it confronts on the world arena.

Bush explicitly repudiated the strategic framework that guided US foreign policy for more than half a century. “For much of the last century America's defense relied on the cold war doctrines of deterrence and containment,” Bush declared. Now, however, “new threats require new thinking.”

He continued: “Deterrence, the promise of massive retaliation against nations, means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.”

The policy of containment was forced upon the US ruling class in its relations with the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the USSR, it confronted the world's second largest industrial power, possessed of a formidable nuclear arsenal as well as a massive conventional military force. Moreover, Washington's main adversary espoused an ideology, however much distorted by the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy, which continued to attract the support of millions all over the world.

The ruling bureaucracy in Moscow had long before repudiated the revolutionary internationalism of the early Bolshevik regime. Nevertheless, to the extent that the USSR adopted measures to defend the nationalized property relations established by the 1917 revolution, Washington saw it as a threat to American capitalism's hegemonic ambitions. The US elite tended to see every revolutionary challenge to its interests in whatever corner of the globe as a byproduct of the initial Soviet revolution.

After the breakdown of the World War II alliance between Washington and the Soviet Union, the most powerful sections of the US ruling class were divided into two factions over how to deal with the Soviet challenge. The first, represented by more moderate Republicans as well as Democrats, and backed by the trade union bureaucracy, advocated “containment,” a policy first outlined by American diplomat George F. Kennan. A rival faction advocated not the containment of Soviet influence within its existing sphere, but rather its “rollback.”

The dispute between the two factions was over tactics rather than principles. Both sides sought the demise of the USSR, while favoring different means to achieve this goal. The conflict was no less bitter for this ultimate unity of ends. The split found expression in the vicious redbaiting and witch-hunting campaigns of the late 1940s and 1950s.

The differences assumed an irreconcilable character after it became clear that the Soviet Union had the capability to respond in kind to an American nuclear strike. The Korean War brought the dispute to a head, when Truman rejected General MacArthur's proposal to use nuclear weapons against China after Chinese forces crossed the Yalu River in November 1950. The abandonment of the nuclear option signaled that the US would not take military action that threatened the actual existence of either the USSR or China.

While containment and even “détente” proved acceptable so long as the world economic situation provided favorable conditions for the profitable expansion of US and international capital, the dispute within the ruling elite was never entirely settled. It erupted to the surface with Kennedy's decision to pursue a diplomatic rather than military settlement of the Cuban missile crisis, which was followed within a year by the president's assassination. These divisions haunted the ruling class again in the Vietnam War when the US military was restrained from employing its full force, including nuclear weapons.

With the onset of economic crisis in the 1970s, the policies of rollback began to gain strength within the US ruling elite. By the end of the decade

Washington drew Soviet forces into a bloody and debilitating war in Afghanistan by instigating provocations by Islamic fundamentalists.

With the assumption of power by the Reagan administration, Washington embarked on a massive and sustained military buildup against the Soviet Union, while it simultaneously pursued a series of military interventions in the semi-colonial countries, from Lebanon to Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Panama.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union more than a decade ago, the foreign policy outlook of ruling circles in the US has undergone extraordinary changes. Increasingly, they have perceived a unique opportunity to use unchallenged US military superiority to overcome all obstacles to US domination of strategic resources and markets. The decade of the 1990s was marked by an escalation of American militarism, with major wars launched against Iraq and Serbia, and numerous smaller scale military interventions in other parts of the world.

This process has culminated in Bush's open-ended "war on terrorism." The war in Afghanistan constitutes only the first step in a violent redivision of the world, as US imperialism strives for global hegemony.

When Bush says that policies of deterrence and containment are no longer adequate and "new thinking" is required, he is really signaling support for the old thinking of the ultra-militarist, extreme right-wing faction of the American establishment that advocated a military solution to the Soviet question more than 50 years ago. These elements now believe that they are freed from all the old political constraints on the use of military power.

"We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best," Bush stated at West Point. "We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants who solemnly sign nonproliferation treaties and then systematically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long." Rather, he affirmed, the solution lies in preemptive strikes.

Along with containment, the new policy repudiates adherence to the entire framework of international laws, treaties and related structures created in the post-World War II period in an attempt to avert another world conflagration.

This policy of unbridled militarism reflects a staggering degeneration of political thought within the American ruling elite. Any conception of utilizing diplomacy and international politics as means of advancing US interests is to be abandoned, and all questions resolved by the unilateral use of military force. The implications of this approach are catastrophic.

Bush made no mention in his speech of the escalating military confrontation between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, a standoff between two nuclear-armed powers that carries with it the threat of a holocaust that could claim 14 million lives. Yet undoubtedly this is the most significant result thus far of the US "war on terrorism."

The invasion of Afghanistan has succeeded in destabilizing the entire Indian subcontinent. The pretension that the massive deployment of US fire power serves to punish those responsible for September 11 has become increasingly farcical. US military operations in Afghanistan claim the lives of hapless farmers and villagers, while serving to prop up Washington's handpicked government against rival warlords.

The US military campaign has also provided the justification for Israel to launch its own preemptive strikes against the Palestinian population in the West Bank; further destabilizing the entire Middle East.

In the end, the US campaign will only exacerbate the social, economic and political conditions that have given rise to terrorism in the first place.

To those who question the real aims of the so-called war on terrorism, Bush replies that it is a "conflict between good and evil." He continues, "And America will call evil by its name.... Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree.... Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time and in every place. Targeting innocent civilians for murder is always and everywhere wrong. Brutality against women is always and everywhere

wrong."

Of course, such "moral truths" are instantly suspended wherever US strategic and profit interests are at stake. In Vietnam, the US war claimed three million lives, most of them civilians killed in saturation bombing campaigns and massacres by US troops. In the more recent military operations in Iraq and against Serbia, this strict moral code was again suspended, as unarmed civilians were targeted for death from the air. Today, soldiers returning from the Afghan intervention report orders to kill all civilians, women and children included, in areas deemed to be Taliban or Al Qaeda strongholds.

The imbecility of the claim that foreign policy consists of a struggle "between good and evil" lies in the obvious fact that others are also capable of demonizing their enemies and waging war on similar grounds. Undoubtedly, for the Hindu chauvinists the Pakistanis are "evil," just as for the Islamic fundamentalists on the other side of the border Hinduism is a morally repugnant scourge to be eliminated, if necessary, by means of a nuclear conflagration.

Bush's speech highlighted the growing threat that his administration will launch a new, precipitous military adventure in the near future. Such an attack will be motivated in the immediate term by the administration's desire to distract public attention from the spiraling revelations concerning the government's cover-up of warnings to the FBI, CIA and the White House itself before the September 11 attacks.

Increasingly, these revelations paint a picture of an administration presiding over a general stand-down of the national security apparatus in the face of a clear and present danger of terrorist provocations. That it did so while going ahead with preexisting plans for US military intervention in Afghanistan raises the obvious question of whether the attacks were allowed to proceed in order to provide a justification for war.

Moreover, recent polls have indicated that despite the scare campaign waged by administration officials about imminent terrorist attacks and the government-media effort to pump up patriotism, the greatest concerns of the overwhelming majority of the American people are over the growing threat to their jobs and living standards. War and terrorism are a distant afterthought. This spells a potential debacle in the November mid-term elections for the Republican Party, which faces the prospect of losing control over the House of Representatives, having already lost control of the Senate.

Despite repeated denials of immediate plans for an invasion of Iraq and claims by military experts that no such campaign can begin until next year, there is an obvious danger that the administration will launch an "October surprise" military attack to boost Republican chances at the polls.

Beyond such short-term considerations, the turn to a policy of frenzied militarism has more fundamental roots. It is driven by mounting social, economic and political contradictions at home for which those in power have no answer. These are problems created not by "rogue states" or small groups of terrorists, but by fundamental contradictions within the capitalist system itself.

The response to Bush's speech within the media has been, at best, muted. No top Democrats—Clinton, Gore, Daschle, Gephardt—have come forward to challenge the call for preemptive strikes or question the repudiation of the framework of US foreign policy for more than 50 years.

Who will stop the pyromaniacs of the Bush administration? The answer is not to be found in any section of the political establishment. That historic task lies with the working class. The struggle against militarism can be waged only through the independent mobilization of American workers, in unity with workers and oppressed people internationally, in a political struggle against the capitalist financial elite and its political representatives.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact