

On eve of US war against Iraq: the political challenge of 2003

The WSWS Editorial Board
6 January 2003

The year 2003 opens against the backdrop of impending war and deepening economic crisis. Within a matter of weeks the US will be raining bombs on a defenseless Iraqi population.

The claims that the Bush administration has not yet decided on war are as false as they are cynical. The White House has already signed off on a military attack, as is patently clear from the massive deployment of American forces in the Persian Gulf. Tens of thousands of troops are being moved into the region, accompanied by a naval armada bristling with the most advanced and deadly weapons and buttressed by hundreds of war planes. Military operations are already well under way, in the form of special operations activities in the Kurdish enclave in the north of Iraq and escalating bombing attacks in the so-called “no-fly” zones.

There is nothing Baghdad could do, including the elimination of Saddam Hussein, to avert a US invasion. Bush’s talk of Iraqi violations of UN resolutions are transparent pretexts. Washington’s aim is not the “disarming” of Iraq or even the removal of Saddam Hussein, but rather the occupation of the country and the seizure of its oilfields.

Whatever the immediate military outcome of the war, the Bush administration is setting into motion processes that will have the most convulsive impact, affecting not only the Middle East, but every part of the globe. The war will further inflame international public opinion, inevitably resulting in violent reprisals not only against US soldiers, but also against American civilians, both abroad and at home.

Within Iraq itself, the American onslaught will evoke deep and implacable opposition. The Iraqi masses will correctly look on US military forces as colonial-style occupiers and oppressors.

The same rationale that underlies the war against Iraq will inevitably lead to wars against Iran, Syria and other countries in the region. The US drive to dominate the world’s oil supplies will lead to increasingly fierce conflicts with more powerful nations, including Russia, China and America’s great power rivals in Europe and Japan. A US conquest of Iraq will initiate a process whose ultimate outcome will be a third world war.

The disastrous implications of Washington’s war agenda can already be seen from the results of the US invasion of Afghanistan. A year after the fall of the Taliban regime, American soldiers continue to come under attack from an outraged population. The US intervention in Central Asia has further poisoned relations between India and Pakistan, both of which have nuclear weapons. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Pakistani dictatorship to appease the US, tensions between Washington and Islamabad are growing, under conditions of intense popular anger and widening protests directed against both the US and the Musharraf regime. Already border clashes have occurred between American and Pakistani forces.

The Bush administration’s warmongering has produced a sudden escalation of tensions on the Korean peninsula. Washington’s inflammatory rhetoric and provocative actions have led Pyongyang to take countermeasures that raise the danger of nuclear war, while the South is convulsed by massive anti-American demonstrations.

The US government is preparing to unleash a wave of military violence around the world not seen since the 1930s and 1940s. The closest historical parallel to the foreign policy of the Bush administration, in its unabashed reliance on brute force and aggression, is that of the Nazis.

What were the hallmarks of the foreign policy of German imperialism under Hitler? An ever-expanding cycle of military aggression, targeting first those countries too weak to seriously resist the Wehrmacht. The occupation of countries, overthrow of governments and installation of puppet regimes. The fabrication of crude pretexts to justify preemptive and unprovoked wars. Open contempt for international law and the flouting of traditional norms of diplomacy. In short—a policy of seizure and plunder.

On every count, there is no fundamental difference between the methods employed on the world stage by the fascist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s—whether it be Italy’s rape of Ethiopia or Germany’s conquest of Poland—and those of the Bush administration.

The world is witnessing a new eruption of imperialism in its most violent form. The Bush administration is setting out to subjugate entire regions of the planet in order to satisfy the drive of the American ruling elite to monopolize vital resources, dominate world markets and harness new sources of super-exploited, cheap labor.

The real reasons for war

The escalation of tensions on the Korean peninsula has one salutary political consequence: it thoroughly exposes the official pretexts employed to justify war against Iraq. The US government claims the war is justified because Iraq is building weapons of mass destruction and defying UN resolutions. It has made the same claims against North Korea, but, in its public response, drawn sharply different conclusions.

Saddam Hussein is cooperating with UN inspections and is years away, even by US estimates, from building an atomic bomb. North Korea has kicked out UN inspectors and restarted the Yongbyong nuclear reactor complex, giving it access to enough plutonium to make a half dozen atomic bombs in six months. But the US response has been to escalate its war preparations against Iraq, while downplaying the conflict with North Korea and urging dialogue, mediated through the United Nations.

Bush administration spokesmen have been unable to provide any rationale for what one critic has called its “schizophrenic” approach to the two countries. That is because the real reasons for war with Iraq have nothing to do with the propaganda from the White House and State Department which is echoed uncritically in the American media.

The administration speaks for those within the American ruling elite who have seized on the collapse of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to establish a Pax Americana, in which US corporate interests, backed by troops and bombs, dominate the globe. The key to this scheme for world hegemony is unchallenged rule over the Eurasian continent and control of its strategic resources, first and foremost, petroleum. On this basis American imperialism seeks to blackmail and bully the entire world.

The military-diplomatic web site *Stratfor.com* recently published a blunt

assessment of the real American interests at stake in a new Persian Gulf war. *Stratfor.com* has close ties to forces within the Bush administration and generally articulates its strategic outlook. The Internet site cited three overriding goals: seizing control of Iraqi oil, transforming Iraq into a base for further American military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, and carrying out a bloodbath that traumatizes the Arab population and cements American-Israeli domination of the region.

Stratfor.com declared:

“The decision to attack Iraq grew from psychological and strategic needs. Psychologically, Washington wants to redefine how Arabs view the United States; the goal is fear and respect. Strategically, the United States wants to occupy Iraq in order to control the pivot of the Middle East: From an occupied Iraq, it can exert force throughout the region. The assumption has been that a victory in Iraq would redefine the dynamic in the Arab world. Some Arab governments, such as that in Kuwait, have welcomed this evolution while others, such as Saudi Arabia, dread it. All understand that a US-occupied Iraq would change the region decisively. The United States would become, unambiguously, the heir to British and Ottoman power in the Arab world.

“Oil would be one lever of that power. If the United States establishes control over Iraq’s oil supplies—the second largest in the world—oil prices could take a dramatic dive, and Arab states would be deprived of the leverage they now employ within OPEC to shape oil policies. Oil-rich Arab nations—first and foremost, Saudi Arabia—probably could not keep their economies afloat. Economic realities might achieve what popular indignation could not—regime change.

“Then there is Israel. The defeat of Iraq, one of Israel’s most vocal foes, would leave the Jewish state and Washington the dominant players in the region, forcing Arab governments to live under the threat of economic and military destruction. Arab leaders also fear that an Israel emboldened by Iraq’s defeat would push Palestinians farther from the West Bank and Gaza Strip into neighboring countries. A forced exodus of this type would create a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions, one that Arab governments would not be able to handle.”

The crisis of American capitalism

There is an immense element of recklessness in the foreign policy of the Bush administration. Bush’s doctrine of preemptive war and its initial application in the Persian Gulf have profoundly destabilizing implications not only for the Middle East, but for the entire world. An American invasion and occupation of Iraq will undermine all of the Arab bourgeois regimes, while enormously heightening tensions between the US and both Europe and Japan. Iran, India, Pakistan, China and other nations will conclude that their only means of warding off a US attack is the most rapid possible development of nuclear weapons.

Washington is ripping apart the entire structure of international relations that for more than half a century facilitated a degree of stability and held in check the contradictions that twice in the twentieth century led to global conflagrations.

These policies, whose vast implications are barely foreseen by those in power, are a reflection not of confidence, but rather a deep sense of crisis. American imperialism is very powerful, but its contradictions are more powerful. US military might rests on an increasingly fragile economic base. The recklessness of the Bush administration is a response to growing anxiety in ruling circles over the deterioration of the American economy, and the convulsive domestic implications of the worsening social crisis in the US.

A major component of Bush’s foreign policy is the notion that by grabbing critical resources around the world, American capitalism will be able to offset intractable economic difficulties. It is an attempt to use military power to overcome economic problems for which the US ruling elite has no solution. Hence the proliferation of commentaries from Washington and oil industry think tanks on the beneficial impact on world

petroleum prices of a US seizure of Iraqi oil facilities.

American capitalism faces an increasingly desperate financial and economic crisis. Unemployment is rising, rates of industrial investment and output are stagnant or falling, and both corporate and personal indebtedness are at record levels.

State governments all over the country are bankrupt, and federal budget deficits are once again mounting. The anxiety in ruling circles has been exacerbated by the dismal Christmas selling season, signaling a decline in the one sector of the economy that had withstood the general recessionary trend—consumer spending.

The current crisis was precipitated by the collapse of the speculative Wall Street boom of the 1990s. An estimated \$2.6 trillion in stock values was wiped out in the course of 2002, bringing the total losses to \$7 trillion since Wall Street hit its peak in the summer of 2000.

Last year marked the first time since the Great Depression that stock prices fell for three consecutive years. After beginning the year at the 10,000 mark, the Dow Jones average flirted with 7,000 in July and again in October. The decline of 16.8 percent in the Dow Jones was the worst one-year fall since 1977, while last month’s plunge of 6 percent was the worst December showing since 1931. The broader Standard & Poor’s index showed a drop of 23 percent, while the NASDAQ fell nearly 33 percent and has lost three quarters of its value since 2000.

These colossal losses have an inexorable effect on the overall economy. Corporate and individual bankruptcies are at record levels. American corporations defaulted on more bonds in 2001-2002 than in the previous 20 years combined. Corporate investment has virtually dried up. And public confidence in American business and the capitalist system itself is at its lowest point since the Depression, following a year of corporate scandals—Enron, WorldCom, Global Crossing, Tyco, etc.—linked to the stock market collapse.

The US economy is sliding back into recession despite the Bush administration’s claims of economic recovery. Unemployment has hit an eight-year high, and consumer confidence plunged in December. Retail sales during the Christmas season were the worst in 30 years. Particularly hard-hit were lower-priced retail stores serving working class consumers.

The conditions of life for working people are rapidly deteriorating. Nearly every US state is planning major cutbacks in spending on social services, just as rising unemployment and poverty are increasing the need. On December 28, the Bush administration cut off unemployment benefits for 800,000 jobless workers, after congressional Republicans, with only token opposition from the Democrats, blocked a proposed extension.

The international position of American capitalism is under increasing pressure. Foreign investors in American financial markets see asset values plunging and may begin withdrawing funds, making it impossible for the US to finance its gargantuan balance of payments deficit, now on the order of \$500 billion a year. This in turn calls into question the stability of the US dollar, the basis of the world financial system. The dollar fell 15.2 percent in 2002 against the euro and 9.8 percent against the yen.

There is growing evidence that, for the first time since the 1930s, the world economy is entering a period of global deflation, a vicious circle in which prices fall, asset values collapse, credit dries up, production contracts, trade declines and the profit system essentially grinds to a halt.

The foreign policies of the Bush administration are no less driven by domestic political exigencies, rooted in the explosive social implications of the economic impasse. The US government is dominated by the need to distract and confuse public opinion through a never-ending series of provocations—terrorist alerts, military-diplomatic crises, and wars. Here again the position of American capitalism bears comparison with that of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, when the Hitler regime took the road of war as its only answer to mounting social contradictions at home.

The Bush administration combines methods of international gangsterism—violence combined with blackmail and lies—with domestic

repression. The enormous concentration of police powers in the hands of the federal government since September 11, 2001 has nothing to do with protecting ordinary Americans from the danger of terrorism. It is aimed at facilitating an ever more open attack on the living standards and previous social gains of the American working class.

It is no accident that Bush insisted that the bill establishing his new Department of Homeland Security strip federal government workers of their union and civil service rights. This attack is part of a broader pattern, in which “national security” and the “war on terrorism” are used as the pretext for demanding ever greater sacrifices from workers and depriving them of any legal means of defending themselves against the encroachments of the employers. This is the significance of the administration’s decision to force United Airlines into bankruptcy, setting the stage for corporate giants in the airline industry and beyond to rip up contracts, impose unprecedented cuts in wages and benefits, and intensify industrial exploitation through speedup, forced overtime and the elimination of all health and safety standards.

The struggle against imperialism

The coming war in Iraq will involve massive economic costs. It will exacerbate all of the internal economic problems of American capitalism and intensify the social crisis at home. It will necessitate deeper attacks on the working class, against both its democratic rights and its social interests. Jobs, health care, pensions, education, housing—all will face further attacks as a result of the war.

The American ruling elite has embarked on policies that will inevitably end in catastrophe. The financial oligarchy, obsessed with increasing its personal wealth, is setting into motion massive social forces it does not comprehend. History teaches that war is the most dangerous recourse of state policy. It inevitably produces consequences that are unforeseen. Washington’s headlong rush to war will fuel anti-imperialist struggles all over the world and intensify social protest and resistance within the US.

The onslaught against an impoverished and tortured nation will evoke revulsion both internationally and within the US itself. There is no mass constituency in America for the type of barbarism the US government intends to unleash.

Already a rising tide of anti-imperialist opposition is evident in Europe and Asia. But those who seek to fight US imperialism must harbor no illusions in Washington’s imperialist rivals. Notwithstanding popular anti-war sentiment, and their own fears of the consequences of war, neither the European nor Japanese bourgeoisie are able to effectively counter the policies pursued by Washington. Whether through bribes or threats, all will eventually fall into line behind the hegemonic imperialist power.

The present-day preponderance of the US among the imperialist powers is a specific expression of the basic contradictions of world capitalism. Twice in the twentieth century, these contradictions erupted into world war. Out of the Second World War, the United States emerged as the dominant world power, but its sway was limited by the existence of the Soviet Union, the Chinese Revolution and the mass struggles that accompanied the collapse of the European colonial empires. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 has removed this check on American military action, opening the door to a new explosion of imperialist violence.

While apologists for capitalism hailed the end of the Cold War as “the end of history,” the new eruption of militarism demonstrates that the post-World War II settlement did not resolve the crisis of world capitalism. This crisis is rooted in the contradiction between a highly developed and intensively integrated world economy and the framework of the nation-state system within which the profit system developed and to which it is wedded.

The essential contradiction that gave rise to wars and revolutions in the twentieth century is building toward a new eruption. America’s attempt to establish global domination signals the approach of a new revolutionary crisis internationally. The ultimate outcome will be either a descent into

barbarism or mankind’s advance to socialism.

The basic social force for opposing imperialist war is the working class. The struggle against militarism must be rooted in the mobilization of this force on an international scale.

The challenge of the coming year is to provide the growing movement against war with a program upon which the international working class can be mobilized as an independent political force. Opposition is already growing within the US to Bush’s predatory policies both abroad and at home. The media claims of Bush’s popularity with the American people are cynical and false. Bush’s supposed mass support is really a distorted and inverted reflection of the absence of any serious opposition from the Democratic Party or any other section of the political establishment.

Even opinion polls conducted by the media demonstrate that public sentiment against war with Iraq has increased, despite the collapse of any opposition from the Democratic Party. According to one current poll, even if it is assumed that no American soldiers are killed, a majority is opposed to a unilateral attack on Iraq.

The US working class has a profound responsibility to oppose the predatory policies of the Bush administration. It must not allow the American people to be implicated in war crimes perpetrated in their name.

American workers who seek an alternative to Bush’s program of war and domestic reaction must draw the political lessons of the collapse of liberalism and the drastic shift to the right by the two big business parties. It is necessary to break with the political straitjacket of the two-party system and build an independent political movement of working people that advances a socialist alternative to the capitalist system.

Next month will mark the fifth anniversary of the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the political organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties around the world. As we approach this milestone, we pledge to intensify our efforts to make the WSWS the political focal point for the development of an independent socialist movement of the international working class against US militarism and world imperialism.

This movement must openly and frankly oppose the capitalist system. It must link the fight against imperialist war to a program for the most far-reaching redistribution of wealth from the ruling elite to the working people. This means mounting a massive assault on entrenched wealth and privilege, including the expropriation of the corporate and financial oligopolies and their conversion into public enterprises, run on the basis of scientific planning and under the democratic control of the working class.

The potential for such a movement is already demonstrated in the growing readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The WSWS reaches thousands of readers every day, publishes in a dozen languages, and finds supporters and correspondents in dozens of countries and on every continent.

We call on our readers and supporters to expand the influence of the WSWS, distribute its commentaries and statements and contribute their own articles. We call on them to contact the WSWS, join our movement and participate in the building of the Socialist Equality Party in the US and the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International around the world.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact