

“Left” apologists for US imperialism red-bait the antiwar movement

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The emergence of a broad-based movement of opposition to the Bush administration's war against Iraq caught the American political and media establishment unawares. In the response of the various factions of the ruling elite there has been one common theme: the need to purge the antiwar movement of its left-wing elements and render it politically harmless.

The instinctive response of the extreme right is to red-bait, denouncing the demonstrations as the organizational work of “communists” and other outside agitators. The establishment “liberals” of the *New York Times* variety intervene more subtly in an effort to isolate and discredit socialist tendencies and bring the protests under the control of a section of the Democratic Party.

Both factions have singled out for attack the Workers World Party, which plays a leading role in ANSWER, a coalition of antiwar groups that has organized large demonstrations in Washington and elsewhere.

These efforts are aided and abetted by another group—ex-radicals and former antiwar liberals centered around the *Nation* magazine. Three articles in particular, appearing at about the time of the first significant US protests, held last October, marked the beginning of this group's intervention. The articles are: “A Smart Peace Movement is MIA,” by Marc Cooper, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* of September 29, 2002; “Who Will Lead?” by Todd Gitlin (*Mother Jones* magazine, October 14, 2002); and “Behind the Placards: The odd and troubling origins of today's antiwar movement,” by David Corn (*LA Weekly*, November 1, 2002).

Cooper, a contributing editor of the *Nation*, went to Chile in 1971 to volunteer his services to the Salvador Allende Popular Front regime and was serving as Allende's translator at the time of the military coup. Gitlin was the president of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1963-64. After 16 years at the University of California at Berkeley, he now is a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University in New York. Corn, the Washington editor of the *Nation*, formerly worked for Ralph Nader's Center for Study of Responsive Law.

The three pieces in question constitute a type of “left” gutter journalism. Their authors are unable to muster serious arguments, resorting instead to distortions, amalgams and ad hominem attacks.

In their attacks on left-wing elements, they echo the professional red-baiters. One telling episode speaks volumes about the political and moral character of this political layer. On November 19, David Corn appeared on the “O'Reilly Factor”—a talk-show on Fox News hosted by the extreme-right demagogue Bill O'Reilly. Corn carried out his assignment for O'Reilly, witch-hunting the Workers World group and smearing the antiwar movement.

O'Reilly introduced Corn by saying, “And you say that the Workers World Party, a hardcore communist organization in the USA, is putting together these peace rallies, is that true?” Corn replied, “To call them an organization is perhaps giving them too much credit. I doubt they have

enough people to fill a telephone booth. They're a very small sectarian political outfit based in New York City.”

O'Reilly, a figure in the tradition of Joseph McCarthy, aptly characterized Corn's appearance, saying, “[Y]ou finger a guy who is on the board of ANSWER ... you finger him as being really the driver behind all this, right?”

Gitlin and Cooper belong to the generation of former antiwar protesters and radicals who have undergone a dramatic transformation over the past two decades, shifting further and further to the right. They long ago made their peace with the existing social order and seek at every critical moment to demonstrate their loyalty to the powers that be.

A watershed in the evolution of this layer was the civil war in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the US-led bombing campaign against Serbia in 1998. A host of former leftists became enthusiastic supporters of imperialist intervention and uncritically accepted the war propaganda doled out by the media, which portrayed the NATO war as a crusade against “ethnic cleansing.”

The Yugoslav tragedy, including its dismemberment in 1991 and the ensuing communalist strife in Bosnia and Kosovo, was the product of a concerted campaign of destabilization carried out by the US and the European powers. The ex-radicals ignored this process and lent their “left” credentials to the demonization of Slobodan Milosevic, the former Stalinist turned Serb nationalist. Marxists, notwithstanding their opposition to the Milosevic regime and its treatment of the Albanian Kosovars, recognized that the US-NATO assault on Serbia was an imperialist war and the prelude to greater, bloodier wars.

Given this background, it is noteworthy that in all three above-cited articles, the authors make great play of the presence of former US attorney general Ramsey Clark (a leading spokesman for ANSWER) on the International Committee to Defend Slobodan Milosevic. Corn observes that the “WWP [Workers World Party] has campaigned against the war-crimes trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic” and that Clark has called the tribunal “a tool of the West to crush those who stand in the way of US imperialism.”

Corn, Gitlin and Cooper all take for granted that only an ultra-left fanatic could hold such a position. That the Milosevic tribunal is a politically motivated travesty of justice, staged in large part to justify the US-NATO aggression against Yugoslavia, is now widely acknowledged. The former Serbian president has been able to turn the tables on his accusers and expose numerous distortions, exaggerations and fabrications.

For our three authors, support for the US-NATO war against Serbia was only the beginning of a new political career: that of “left” defender of US militarism. All three embraced the Bush administration's “war on terror” and the US invasion of Afghanistan. Cooper writes in his *LA Times* piece that “a proportionate American military response to Al Qaeda was not only justified but absolutely necessary” and paints the present abysmal situation in Afghanistan in glowing colors.

Now, however, Cooper, Gitlin and Corn claim to be opponents of a war

against Iraq. Why they choose to oppose this particular war, while defending its precursors, they do not explain. In fact, as we shall see, they do not really oppose war against Iraq.

On the contrary, they accept uncritically all of the basic premises of the American establishment, echoing the line of the *New York Times*, which has criticized Bush's anti-Iraq war drive on purely tactical, rather than principled, grounds.

The hallmark of all three is a lack of any serious analysis—historical, political or social. In their haste to smear socialist and anti-imperialist critics of Bush's war policy, they cannot be bothered with such matters as the driving forces of the coming war, the history of US intervention in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, the policies and political character of the Bush administration, the social situation in the US, or the economic context within which the war drive is unfolding.

Significantly, the word "oil" does not appear in any of these articles.

All three writers presume to speak as political authorities offering the benefit of their insight to "save" the antiwar movement from self-destruction. But even apart from the reactionary content of their politics, the dearth of substantive analysis brands them as charlatans and imposters.

Cooper, in his article, denounces the "knee-jerk faction of the left" who opposed the US war on Afghanistan: "Steeped in four decades' worth of a crude anti-Americanism, it believed that the use of any American military power was and would always be immoral." Returning to this theme later in his article, Cooper calls on what he refers to as "more mature segments of the left" to "step into the forefront of the peace movement and displace those who can only see evil in America."

Cooper's *modus operandi* is that of all demagogues: setting up a straw man "who can only see evil in America" in order to knock it down. Socialists do not see "only evil" in America. They make a fundamental distinction between the ruling elite, its political representatives and military command, on the one hand, and its working population, on the other.

In any event, Cooper is not defending the American people from crude attempts to lump them together with the US ruling elite. He is defending American imperialism against those who fail to see its "positive" side.

Cooper goes on to argue that "the full dimensions of the standoff with Iraq must be honestly acknowledged." He writes: "Yes, Bush is exploiting war fever for domestic political purposes. But it's also true that Hussein is a bloody tyrant and that the Iraqi people would be much better off without him; he has violated many UN resolutions; he continues to try to develop horrific weapons of mass destruction; he cynically manipulated the UN weapons inspection program and might again attempt to do so if its is reinstated."

These are accusations taken directly from the stockpile of US war propaganda, repeated as if they were indisputably true. Cooper has no more proof of Iraq's "horrific weapons of mass destruction" than George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld or Colin Powell.

His parroting of the US line on Iraq raises the obvious question: if the US military is capable of waging "just" wars for democracy and human rights, as in Kosovo and Afghanistan, why not support its latest humanitarian effort? In reality, Cooper does not oppose a military strike on Iraq, he merely opposes "the administration's rush to war." (Gitlin repeats the same phrase in his piece, calling on the "left" to weigh in "usefully ... against the rush to war.")

Cooper asks rhetorically, "If the left is for containment instead of invasion, then isn't it the US armed forces that must do the containing?... If, at the end of the day, Hussein does foil weapons inspections, what is to be done then? What are the responsibilities of the international community in countenancing or confronting a long-standing and dangerous dictator like Hussein?" Cooper chooses not to reply to his own question. He doesn't have to. His answer is obvious.

Cooper speaks for a section of the ruling elite that seeks a more prudent

and deliberate buildup to war, fearing that Bush's recklessness might have politically disastrous consequences. His argument that "The fight against Bin Laden's gang is necessary, and going to war against Iraq can only detract from it," is the line of a section of the Congressional Democrats, some of whom voted to give Bush the authority to attack Iraq.

Gitlin postures as a friend to antiwar protesters, someone who wishes the movement only the best. In his piece he calls the emergence of protest "an overdue fact and a necessary one." He quickly turns his fire, however, on the "leadership of the current antiwar movement"—presumably Workers World—which is "building a firebreak around itself, turning the movement toward the bitter-end orthodoxy of the Old Left and away from the millions of Americans whose honest concerns and ambivalence might fuel it."

What this "bitter-end orthodoxy" might be is never spelled out. Its essence, however, is clear: opposition to capitalism. The "unorthodox" Gitlin long ago made his peace with the existing social order and has enjoyed a comfortable academic life as a result.

With horror, Gitlin reports on speaking to a rally outside the UN and glimpsing placards that read "NO SANCTIONS, NO BOMBING." Fairly frothing, Gitlin denounces this slogan as "emblematic of a refusal to face a grotesque world." He rebukes the "left-wing sectarians who promote 'NO SANCTIONS, NO BOMBING' for 'a near-total unwillingness to rebuke Saddam Hussein' and 'rejection of any conceivable rationale for using force.'"

This hysterical reaction to the most elementary demands places Gitlin, politically speaking, squarely within the ranks of the Congressional Democrats, Clinton, and the rest of the "liberal" establishment that has played a decisive role in facilitating the Bush administration's war drive.

Describing left-wing opponents of the administration's war policy as "morally tainted," Gitlin asserts that "Liberal-left antiwarriors need to be out-front patriots if they expect to draw the attention and the support of Americans at large." Here the former Vietnam War protester projects his own cowardice and prostration before US imperialism onto the broad mass of working people. As with all his ilk, he can only conceive of the American working class as a reactionary force.

Gitlin asks rhetorically: "Doesn't Saddam Hussein bear some responsibility for the disaster? Must that not be noted?" This insistence on the culpability of the Hussein regime and the crimes committed by the various regimes targeted by the US, some of which are real, some exaggerated, is a common feature of the three writers' articles.

It becomes the pretext for justifying imperialist intervention and painting it in democratic and humanitarian colors. Here, as in everything else, Gitlin and company are merely parroting the ruling elite itself.

For Marxists, the depredations of these regimes are, at bottom, expressions of their class character: they are regimes of the national bourgeoisie. Their essentially reactionary character is bound up with their inability to establish any genuine independence from imperialism. Indeed, at one time or another, all of them, including that of Saddam Hussein, have enjoyed the sponsorship of the US or some other imperialist power.

The liberation of the people from such regimes is the task of the working masses themselves, and is inseparably bound up with the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles of the international working class.

Corn begins his article by referring scornfully to issues raised at the October 26 rally in Washington: "Free Mumia [Abu-Jamal]. Free the Cuban 5. Free Jamil Al-Amin (that's H. Rap Brown, the former Black Panther convicted in March of killing a sheriff's deputy in 2000). And free Leonard Peltier. Also, defeat Zionism. And, while we're at it, let's bring the capitalist system to a halt."

Corn's sarcasm is directed against any conception that a connection exists between the Bush administration's warmongering abroad and its policies of repression and social reaction at home, as well as its support for the Sharon regime in Israel. This brings to the fore the second thread

that runs throughout the arguments of Cooper, Gitlin and Corn.

In addition to isolating and purging left-wing elements from the antiwar movement, they seek to separate the issue of war from the social and political issues (social inequality, the attack on democratic rights, the disenfranchisement of the working class within the two-party system) with which it is organically linked. These two themes are driven by the same political motivation: to prevent the emergence of a popular movement against war based on the working class and animated by a socialist perspective.

In any event, like Cooper and Gitlin, Corn is not really opposed to war against Iraq. He merely differs with the Bush administration's tactics, writing: "In a telling sign of the organizers' priorities, the cause of Mumia Abu-Jamal ... drew greater attention than the idea that revived and unfettered weapons inspections should occur in Iraq before George W. Bush launches a war."

An "antiwar" movement dedicated to "revived and unfettered weapons inspections" as the prelude to possible military aggression! Such is Doctor Corn's prescription. With such friends, genuine opponents of the Iraq war have no need of enemies.

Corn is the most explicit red-baiter and anticommunist of the three, as his appearance on the O'Reilly program demonstrated. He denies, in one passage, that it is "red-baiting to note the WWP's [Workers World Party's] not-too-hidden hand" in the antiwar movement, and then writes a few paragraphs later: "Sure, the commies can rent buses and obtain parade permits, but if they have a say in the message, as they have had, the antiwar movement is going to have a tough time signing up non-lefties."

Not accidentally, Corn is also the most explicit advocate of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. The Washington editor of the *Nation* writes: "The antiwar movement won't have a chance of applying pressure on the political system unless it becomes much larger and able to squeeze elected officials at home and in Washington. To reach that stage, the new peace movement will need the involvement of labor unions and churches."

This would mean, in practice, an antiwar movement subordinate to the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. Corn demands to know, moreover, whether it is "appropriate for groups and churches that care about human rights and worker rights abroad and at home to make common cause with those who champion socialist tyrants?" referring to the Workers World Party's support for North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

Calling Kim a "socialist" is a gross distortion of reality, but then so too is the reference to the AFL-CIO as a fighter for worker rights "abroad and home." The US trade union apparatus has for years been a conduit of CIA funds and vehicle for American imperialist operations throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. "At home" it has collaborated directly over the past 20 years in the destruction of living standards, jobs, working conditions and pensions.

Cooper, Gitlin and Corn are hardened and conscious enemies of any mass movement opposed to American capitalism. This makes it impossible for them to oppose the war on Iraq, which is rooted in the imperialist world system and its contradictions. The frenzied character of the attacks by these three and others of their ilk on radical elements in the antiwar movement is the product of the objective situation itself, their resulting fear of a radicalized population and their own sense of isolation.

Events, meanwhile, are brilliantly confirming the Marxist critique of imperialism, which is reemerging politically and militarily in its purest and most violent form. The more this critique is vindicated, the more these essentially right-wing elements scramble to lend "their own" imperialist power a democratic and progressive coloration. The pathetic and transparent character of their sweatings is a measure of the impossibility of their assignment.



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