Wall Street Journal editor's brief for a "Pax Americana"

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The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power, *Max Boot, Basic Books, 2002*

The Savage Wars of Peace, by Max Boot, the editorial features editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, is a tendentious book, not to be taken seriously as a work of historiography. However, it has a certain contemporary political significance in that the author attempts to concoct a historical justification for the aggressive and militaristic foreign policy of the Bush administration.

The author's arguments are thoroughly anti-democratic. He is in favor of "presidential wars," that is, military actions initiated by the chief executive without a formal declaration of war or specific authorization by Congress.

His analysis is not so much directed at opponents of militarism, but at those in the defense establishment whom he believes are still in the thrall of the so-called "Vietnam syndrome." In *The Savage Wars of Peace* Boot argues against the policies of the post-Vietnam-era military leadership, which he deems too cautious about the commitment of US forces overseas and excessively focused on minimizing casualties.

In 2001 Boot published a column in the *Wall Street Journal* lamenting the lack of US casualties in the Afghanistan war. He wrote, "The longer term danger is that the war in Afghanistan will do nothing to dispel the widespread impression that Americans are fat, indolent, and unwilling to fight the barbarians on their own terms. We got into this mess in the first place because of the widespread impression—born in Beirut in 1983, seemingly confirmed in Mogadishu in 1993—that Americans are incapable of suffering casualties stoically. This 'bodybag syndrome' is our greatest strategic weakness" ("Winning Still Requires Getting Bloody," *Wall Street Journal*,November 14, 2001).

In his view, popular opposition to US military adventures can be neutralized by skillful media propaganda and should not be a deterrent to policymakers. In *The Savage Wars of Peace*,he writes, "Americans today are not necessarily any more sensitive than were their early twentieth century compatriots about having their soldiers kill large numbers of foreigners, even foreign civilians—no one knows or much cares, it seems, exactly how many Somalis were killed in the Battle of Mogadishu—as long as the events are not brought home to the living roomin vivid color**.** The Pentagon is aware of this, and since Vietnam it has taken pains to ensure that the US press is not given unfettered access to the modern battlefield" (p. 330).

Impressed by the overwhelming firepower of the US military, Boot is not alone in believing that force is the basic solution to all questions of US foreign policy. His outlook is that of an American imperialism that is as bloodthirsty as it is myopic. It dovetails with the bellicose and unilateralist policies of the Bush administration. Such people envision the establishment of a world empire based in Washington.

The last chapter of Boot's work is titled "The Case for a Pax Americana." In a section headed "What Force can Achieve" he writes, "If the US is not prepared to get its hands dirty, then it should stay home" (p. 348).

That Boot's views are widespread within the American political establishment and not confined to a right-wing fringe is indicated by the number of favorable reviews his book has received. A reviewer for the *Washington Post* commends Boot for having the courage to call openly for a "new imperialism" (H.W. Brands, *Washington Post*, May 12, 2002). Another review praises "the important and timely contribution Boot makes to American strategic self-awareness" (Thomas Donnelly, *Foreign Affairs*, June/July 2002). Michael Elliott of CNN, commenting on Boot's book, remarks, "[T]here's nothing wrong with a little colonialism." Brian Urquhart, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, says Boot's analysis "contains a thoughtful list of lessons" ("Is there a case for little wars?" October 10, 2002).

To make the case for aggressive interventionism Boot resorts to a one-sided and banal survey of history. The author undertakes a review of what he calls America's "small wars." These he loosely defines as wars waged against irregular or guerrilla forces. In this category he includes such widely divergent interventions as the conflict with the Barbary states, 1801-1805, the suppression of the Boxer uprising in China in 1900, the US war in the Philippines 1899-1902, the so-called Polar Bear expedition against Soviet Russia in 1918-19, the campaign against Pancho Villa in Mexico in 1916, the campaign against Sandino in Nicaragua, 1927-1933,and, last but not least, Vietnam.

Boot pays little attention to the historical background of the military actions he describes. Instead, his book focuses, in adventure-story fashion, on the individual exploits of US soldiers and sailors.

He begins with a history of the US struggle against the Barbary states in Northern Africa during the term of President Thomas Jefferson in the first decade of the nineteenth century. This action was aimed at defending US commerce in the Mediterranean and did not involve the occupation of territory.

Yet Boot claims this intervention pointed to the future US role as "world policeman." This absurd contention has a political purpose. It is a transparent device whereby Boot seeks to artificially bolster his argument in favor of small wars by portraying the democrat Jefferson as a supporter of imperialist policy.

The US at that time was a relatively weak, fledgling nation compared to the great states of Europe. Industrial capitalism was in its infancy, and the new republic was absorbed with its own internal economic development and more desirous of avoiding foreign engagements than undertaking wars of conquest. Modern nation states were still being consolidated and imperialism, in the contemporary sense of the word, did not yet exist.

This method of one-sidedly and ahistorically picking and choosing facts to fit a pre-determined political conclusion is as unscientific as it is intellectually bankrupt. It has a long and disreputable history. Boot, however, is not deterred by the tendentiousness of his arguments.

The narrative continues with the US adventures in the South Pacific and China. Full chapters are devoted to the US role in suppressing the 1900

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Boxer Rebellion in China and the US war in the Philippines. The chapter on the Philippine war deserves particular note, since Boot hails this bloody intervention as "one of the most successful counterinsurgencies waged by a Western army in modern times" (p. 128).

Indeed, the title of his book, "Savage Wars of Peace," is taken from Rudyard Kipling's Poem "The White Man's Burden." Kipling penned this ode to imperialism as a tribute to the US annexation of the Philippines.

The Philippine war arose from the US defeat of Spain in 1898. The war had been promoted by the big business press in the United States as a war for the "liberation" of the peoples of Cuba and the Philippines from Spanish oppression. However, once the US defeated Spain it turned Cuba into what amounted to a US protectorate and moved to annex the Philippines outright in order to establish a strategic base in the Far East.

The American forces defeated the Spanish garrison in the Philippines with virtually no losses. This was possible because of the efforts of the Philippine insurrectionists, who controlled most of the island. The Filipinos did almost all the fighting and suffered the vast majority of casualties.

The US led Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the Philippine liberation movement, to believe that it had no territorial designs on the island nation. In June 1898 the Philippines declared itself an independent republic, with Aguinaldo as its president.

However, the US "liberators" of the Philippines would not allow Filipino troops to enter Manila, and refused to let them take part in the formal Spanish surrender. In February 1899 a small skirmish between US and Filipino troops was used by President William McKinley as an excuse to launch an all-out attack on the insurgents. Soon afterwards the US Congress voted to formally ratify US annexation of the Philippines.

The Filipinos fought bravely against the superior arms and organization of the Americans, but suffered heavy losses. In November 1899 the Filipinos decided to disband their regular army and resort to guerrilla warfare. In response, the US adopted a scorched earth policy. Villages were burned down; captured enemy soldiers were killed or tortured.

According to Congressional testimony, one officer, Brigadier General Jake Smith, told troops on the island of Samar, "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn. The more you kill and burn the better it will please me" (p. 120). Boot defends all this, declaring, "By the standard of the day, the conduct of US soldiers was better than average for colonial wars."

Leaving aside the question of US atrocities, the record of this conflict does little to substantiate Boot's thesis that "force works." The US faced a relatively weak and disorganized military opposition, yet up to 126,000 US troops were involved at one time or another in the conflict. Fighting continued for years after the formal declaration of victory by the US in 1902. Altogether, more than 200,000 Filipinos were killed in battle or died of starvation or disease out of a population of only 7 million. The US suffered 7,000 casualties, including 4,000 deaths.

Despite its military "success" the US occupiers were never able to stamp out popular opposition to colonial occupation. Demands for independence increased. In 1946 the US was forced to cede formal control of the islands to a Philippine administration.

Boot devotes several chapters to US interventions in Nicaragua, Panama, Haiti and Mexico. The necessity for repeated and protracted US invasions and occupations in Latin America between 1898 and 1934 hardly speaks of unmitigated success. If, as Boot claims, the military solution "works," why did the US find it necessary to send troops to Haiti, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic not once, but scores of times? In Haiti, US forces occupied the country between 1919 and 1934. The US occupied Nicaragua between 1909 and 1933. Boot lamely asserts the US intervention brought "peace and prosperity." Yet Haiti, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic remain among the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

In purely military terms the record of US intervention in Latin America is hardly as brilliant as Boot's account would lead one to believe. In Nicaragua, for example, the US never succeeded in capturing rebel leader Augusto Sandino. Marines were frustrated by Sandino's guerrilla tactics and suffered a number of tactical defeats. Sandino's successes encouraged other nationalist movements in Latin America.

The 1916-1917 US invasion of Mexico by General John Pershing was a debacle. The intervention, justified as a pursuit of Pancho Villa, failed in its mission to capture the insurgent leader. The invasion intensified nationalist sentiment in Mexico and strengthened Villa's political fortunes, which had been waning. After the rout of a detachment of the US 10th Cavalry by regular Mexican army troops at the battle of Carrizal, President Woodrow Wilson decided against risking further fighting, fearing full-scale war with Mexico. US troops were ultimately forced to make a humiliating retreat north across the Rio Grande.

The anti-Bolshevik US intervention in Siberia of 1918-1919, the so-called Polar Bear Expedition, also met with disaster. In a chapter titled "Blood on the Snow," Boot glibly claims the attempt to overthrow the Russian Revolution could have succeeded if only the United States had sent more forces. Boot neglects to explain why the Wilson government decided against such action, because a major factor was the broad sympathy within the American working class for the new revolutionary government in Russia. In any event, even if the claim that more US troops would have staved off disaster were true—itself a dubious assertion—such an argument does not support Boot's argument for "small wars," as a full-scale conflict between the US and Soviet Russia could hardly be described as "small."

Boot greatly underestimates the power of the Russian Revolution. The Bolshevik regime was in perilous condition in the summer of 1918. However, so were the capitalist powers, which were locked in combat on the Western front. Boot ignores the impact of the Russian Revolution, coming after more than three years of terrible slaughter, on the working class in Europe and the United States. Even Winston Churchill felt it would be politically impossible to send conscript troops to Russia. In fact, mutinies arose among US and British troops stationed near Archangel.

In February 1919, two sergeants from the British Yorkshire regiment were court-martialed and given life sentences for refusing to fight. In March, members of the American 339th infantry drew up a petition protesting their continued presence in Russia. Within a few months the US withdrew virtually all its forces. The British stayed longer, but Archangel fell to the Red Army in February 1920.

Boot chooses to include the Vietnam War in his review of small wars, but excludes the Korean War. Again, this selection is not determined by objective logic, but by the subjective need of Boot to put his argument in the best light. The author says that his decision to exclude Korea from his analysis was based on the fact that in Korea the US faced regular forces while in Vietnam the US had to fight irregulars and guerrillas.

This is an arbitrary distinction, since in Vietnam the US faced regular troops as well as guerrillas. In fact, regular as well as irregular troops opposed the US in many of the conflicts Boot cites. Further, in terms of resources expended, casualties and the number of troops involved, neither conflict was "small." The real motivation for excluding Korea is obvious. The near defeat of US troops under General Douglas MacArthur refutes the "force works" thesis. The retreat by MacArthur from the Yalu River was one of the worst debacles ever suffered by the US military.

Boot recognizes that the US defeat in Vietnam does not lend itself to his argument that small wars are "doable." He attempts to present Vietnam as the exception that proves the rule. He claims that US policy failures and military blunders were the primary cause of the debacle. He insists that if the US had followed the lessons of its interventions in the Philippines and Latin America and focused on "pacification" and small unit operations,

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rather than massive “search and destroy” missions, it could have won. The author singles out for praise the Phoenix program, which involved the systematic assassination of those suspected of loyalty to the National Liberation Front. By some estimates, Phoenix led to the death of some 20,000 people.

These arguments advance nothing new. Similar proposals were raised by advisors to the administration of Lyndon Johnson. The problem was that the massive corruption and incompetence of the South Vietnamese puppet government and popular hostility in Vietnam to the American intervention made attempts to “win hearts and minds” unviable. The war, moreover, provoked massive popular opposition to American imperialism around the world, including within the US.

In the end the US government, basing itself on the assumption that “force works,” resorted to ever greater levels of military violence. As anyone even casually familiar with the history of the Vietnam War knows, the US rained more bombs on the country than were dropped on Germany and Japan during World War II. By 1968 the US had more than a half million troops in Vietnam. American forces laid waste to the countryside and bombed cities and villages. Up to 3 million Vietnamese died.

But force ultimately was trumped by politics. The war took place under conditions of an international radicalization of the working class in the former colonial countries and the industrial centers. At home, the US ruling class faced militant trade union and civil rights struggles. The cost of the war fueled social discontent and ultimately led to a major economic crisis and the destabilization of capitalist governments throughout the world. In France, the ruling class faced a general strike in 1968. In 1974 the Nixon administration in the US was driven from office. The South Vietnamese puppet government fell the next year.

Boot ignores the most salient historical fact about all of these wars, or at least those that transpired since 1898: that the United States was engaged in a struggle against revolutionary nationalist or working class movements. That is, its use of violence was for counterrevolutionary purposes, and the mass of the population in the countries attacked by the US were actively hostile to the invaders.

The author ignores similar military adventures by other imperialist powers: France in Algeria and Vietnam; Britain in Iraq, Kenya and Malaya; Italy in Libya; Spain in Morocco; Germany in World War II Yugoslavia and Albania; Japan in Korea and China. The “small wars” of America were just as bloody and reactionary as these colonial wars and wars of conquest, but Boot evades the obvious comparison.

Boot’s notion that the use of military force can be divorced from politics is absurd even from the standpoint of a seriously considered imperialist policy. He leaves out the necessity for diplomacy, the need for alliances, the importance of recruiting a social layer of collaborators from among the native elite.

The author tears the history of America’s “small wars” out of the context of the growth of inter-imperialist antagonisms during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. The US seizure of the Philippines, for example, was part of a scramble for colonies by all of the great powers and a general growth of militarism. Those powers, particularly Germany and Austria-Hungary, which felt shortchanged in the struggle for colonies and markets saw military force as the only means to redress the imbalance. This led to the outbreak of World War I, the greatest slaughter to that point in history.

In the final analysis the world war reflected the fact that the global forces of capitalist production had outgrown the framework of the nation-state system. Capitalism had no peaceful method of resolving this conflict. The US emerged as the “victor” not because it committed the most forces, but because it was able to stay neutral until the final stages of the conflict. US corporations, meanwhile, made vast war profits supplying the belligerents. In the end the US was able to step in to play the role of arbiter among the exhausted European powers.

After World War I, the United States emerged as the dominant world power, but none of the antagonisms that produced the war were resolved. The 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression placed an enormous strain on all of the capitalist states. Once again the world saw the explosion of militarism and the outbreak of an even more horrible world war.

Boot hardly mentions the Cold War. Yet, the existence of the Soviet Union restricted the ability of the American and European capitalists to intervene in the former colonial countries. The US ruling class adopted a policy of “containment,” based on alliances and the rejection of unilateralism.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States is more and more openly advancing an expansionist and predatory agenda. The past decade has seen imperialist interventions in a whole number of countries: Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan.

Boot envisions a protracted period in which the United States and the European capitalists collaborate peacefully, as they did in Bosnia and Afghanistan, in dividing up the spoils of conquest. He even talks of establishing some system in which so-called failed states can be put into “state receivership” under the control of various imperialist powers.

In reality, the eruption of US militarism, which Boot champions, is an expression of a profound and deepening crisis of American and world capitalism. It can only exacerbate inter-imperialist tensions, hurtling the world toward a third world war and the prospect of a nuclear holocaust. The poisoning of relations between the US and both France and Germany over Iraq is clear demonstration of this process.

The increasing reliance of US imperialism on military force is a sign of crisis, not confidence. In the decades following World War II Washington could rely first and foremost on its overwhelming economic superiority to achieve its interests. The dollar, not the Marines, was its greatest strength.

The US drive to war is fueled by the erosion of US economic dominance and the deepening social crisis of American capitalism. The US ruling class is seeking to use the window of opportunity made available by its unchallenged military superiority and the collapse of the USSR to secure control of the Middle East oilfields and other vital resources. At the same time, it seeks to divert the anger of the American working class over rising unemployment and falling living standards by launching an open-ended series of military adventures.

Patriotic propaganda and press self-censorship will not prevent the working class from moving into struggle against the agenda of US imperialism. The enormous cost of war will aggravate the already deepening economic crisis. Hardships will mount as living standards deteriorate and the restriction of civil liberties becomes ever more burdensome.

This is not the first time in history that a ruling class has taken the road of military adventurism in an effort overcome its internal problems. In this regard the analogy that Boot draws with the Roman Empire is more apt than he may care to realize. The course on which US imperialism has embarked will lead to economic, military and political disaster.

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