

The historical roots of neoconservatism: a reply to a slanderous attack on Trotskyism

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The May 20 edition of the Spanish-language daily *El Diario/La Prensa* in New York City published a column by the newspaper's political editor Vicky Pelaez entitled "From permanent revolution to permanent conquest." The thrust of the piece is an attempt to trace the current policies of the extreme right-wing clique that dominates the Bush White House and the Pentagon to the American Trotskyist movement of the 1930s and 1940s.

This article is by no means unique. A number of print and on-line publications ranging from the *Sunday Times* in Britain and *El País* in Spain to the web site *antiwar.com* and that of the John Birch Society have featured similar material. In some cases, these articles are motivated by internecine disputes within the American right. In other cases they represent a confused attempt to explain the eruption of US militarism that has developed under the Bush administration, and the role played in it by a tight-knit group of hard-right ideologues centered in the Pentagon.

Ms. Pelaez's column is distinguished only by the crudeness of the fabricated details that she employs to further her arguments. After tracing the undoubted influence of the right-wing German-born political scientist Leo Strauss (See: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/mar2003/stra-m26.shtml>) upon many of those dubbed neoconservatives in the Bush administration, she proceeds to the alleged Trotskyist connection.

Pelaez writes: "But strangest of all is the political position of all those [Bush administration officials] cited above. The investigation reveals that the parents of all of them were Trotskyist militants, anti-Stalinists and belonged to the movement of the 1930s to the 40s that arose when Leon Trotsky abandoned the Soviet Union and denounced Stalin as a revisionist and a dictator. Of course, the United States supported with all its might the Trotskyist movement, which was spread worldwide; this included here in New York the CIA's organizing their congress at the Waldorf Astoria in 1949 (*The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, Frances Stonor Saunders.)"

She continues: "The children of the made-in-the-USA Trotskyists, their names are Wolfowitz, Perle, Kristol, Feith, David Wurmser, etc., became part of the liberal anticommunist movements between the 1950s and 70s. Later they converted themselves into neoconservatives and transformed Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution into Permanent Conquest based on Strauss. Then they put it into action after taking power, calling it Permanent Expansion, justifying it by saying that 'everything that is good for America is good for the world' and that 'the United States has the right to attack any country if it perceives the existence of any danger.'"

In responding to the above collection of historical distortions and outright falsehoods, one is reminded of Leon Trotsky's remark, "Even slander should make some sense." Trotsky was speaking of the absurd amalgams constructed by the Kremlin to cast him as an agent—depending upon the foreign policy requirements of the day—of German, British, US, or Japanese imperialism.

Pelaez's piece employs similar amalgams, portraying Trotskyism as an instrument of imperialism and drawing a straight line from Trotsky's

founding of the Fourth International 65 years ago to the Bush administration's policy of aggression today.

When the article refers to the "investigation" that uncovered the supposed Trotskyist connection, it is not clear whether she is referring to the work of the *Sunday Times*, which she cites in the previous paragraph, her own probe, or the analysis made in the book she subsequently refers to. She fails to include a closing quotation mark in the passage containing the supposed meat of this investigation, making the source for her assertions even more obscure.

Where is the evidence that the US "supported with all of its might" the worldwide spread of the Trotskyist movement? Washington's ambassador to the Soviet Union, Joseph Davies, endorsed the Moscow Trials in which the leaders of the October Revolution—including Trotsky, tried in absentia—were convicted in monstrous frame-ups and sentenced to death. Under conditions in which he was being pursued by assassins of the Stalinist secret police, the GPU, Trotsky was denied asylum not only in the US, but in every other country of the world, save Mexico. The nationalist government of President Lazaro Cardenas admitted him as an act of defiance against Washington, with which it was in conflict over the nationalization of Mexico's oil. When Trotsky was assassinated in 1940, Washington refused even to allow his corpse to be brought across the border for a memorial meeting.

As for the American Trotskyist movement, 18 of its leaders were jailed under the Smith Act, becoming the first to be persecuted under that infamous anti-communist law. They were imprisoned for opposing war and refusing to renounce the struggle for socialism. Individual leaders—including Carl Skoglund, the organizer of the 1934 Minneapolis general strike—were threatened with deportation.

The Stalinist Communist Party USA, it should be noted, enthusiastically backed these repressive measures, which would later be turned against it as well. There is ample evidence that FBI and CIA spying on American Trotskyists has continued right up to the present.

To substantiate her claim of US government support for the Trotskyists, Pelaez cites Stonor Saunders' book to the effect that the CIA organized a Trotskyist congress in 1949 at the Waldorf Astoria. It is certainly a novel idea that the Trotskyists, a party of workers with limited resources, would have chosen the Waldorf for its congress. In any event, it is pure fantasy. No such meeting ever took place.

It is doubtful that the *El Diario* columnist ever read Stonor Saunders' book. The 1949 conference at the Waldorf that the book refers to was organized not by the Trotskyists, but by a group of prominent American intellectuals—Aaron Copland, Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer, Lillian Hellman—with the support of the Soviet government. Its purpose was to oppose the onset of the cold war and plead for a continuation of the wartime Washington-Moscow alliance.

A group of liberals and "independent socialists" led by philosophy professor Sidney Hook attended the congress and challenged its organizers over the repression in the Soviet Union, including the murder

and jailing of hundreds of thousands of socialists.

The CIA followed this event with some interest and forged relations with some of those who attended. None of the figures involved were connected to the Trotskyist movement, though some had expressed intellectual sympathy with Trotsky before his assassination nine years earlier.

To cobble together the Waldorf Astoria conference, Trotskyism and the CIA as Pelaez does is neither factual nor serious. An understanding of history and the evolution of different political tendencies requires an element of political precision that is sadly lacking in her comments.

Likewise, the claim that all those occupying senior posts in the Bush Pentagon are the “children of Trotskyists” is patently false. There are, however, connecting links between the political struggles within the Trotskyist movement more than six decades ago and the neoconservatives of today. They are to be found in particular in the careers of two individuals: the late Max Shachtman and Irving Kristol. The latter is a prominent figure in the right-wing think tank, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). When, on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, George W. Bush appeared before the AEI to deliver a speech outlining his vision for global military aggression, he began with a verbal tip of the hat to Kristol, who is widely regarded as the “godfather of neoconservatism.”

In 1939, as a student at the City College of New York, Kristol joined the Young People’s Socialist League, as the American Trotskyist youth movement was then called. The YPSL was affiliated to the Trotskyist party, then organized as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He quickly gravitated to an emerging petty-bourgeois tendency within the party led by James Burnham and Max Shachtman, and in a very short time had followed them in breaking with the SWP.

Just before his death, Trotsky led an intense political struggle against these very elements, thereby laying the essential foundations not only for the development of a Marxist party of the working class in the United States, but for the development of the Fourth International worldwide.

Both the Fourth International and the Socialist Workers Party had been founded in 1938. By the autumn of 1939, a bitter faction fight had erupted within the SWP precipitated by the outbreak of the Second World War and, in particular, the signing of the non-aggression pact between Hitler’s Germany and the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union.

The faction that emerged in the SWP under the leadership of Burnham and Shachtman took the position that as a consequence of the pact between Hitler and Stalin it was no longer possible to consider the USSR a workers’ state in any sense of the word, and the Fourth International was compelled to repudiate its program of defense of the USSR against imperialist attack.

Despite his vehement opposition to the existing Soviet bureaucracy, Trotsky rejected the attempt to equate the USSR, which had emerged as a product of a workers’ revolution, with imperialism in general and the Nazi regime in particular. He stressed that, notwithstanding the abominable crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the social foundations of nationalized industry established by the October 1917 revolution remained. The Soviet Union, he insisted, was a society in transition between capitalism and socialism, its historical fate yet to be determined.

His political prognosis was of an alternative character: either the working class would overthrow the bureaucracy through a political revolution and return the Soviet Union to the socialist internationalist principles upon which the 1917 revolution was based, or the bureaucracy would destroy the foundations of the workers’ state and preside over the restoration of capitalism. Tragically, the second variant has been borne out by events.

In the 1939-40 fight within the SWP, Trotsky took great pains not only to refute the immediate arguments of the Burnham-Shachtman faction regarding the concrete issues of the Stalin-Hitler pact, the Soviet invasion of Finland, the events in Poland, etc., but also to draw out their deeply

reactionary political and theoretical implications. As is so often the case in political struggles within the Marxist movement, lurking behind these programmatic differences were profound historical and class questions. Trotsky showed that those backing Shachtman and Burnham would be propelled far to the right by the logic of both their arguments and their philosophical method, which was rooted in a rejection of dialectical materialism. He warned prophetically that those who begin by rejecting dialectical materialism end up not infrequently in the camp of reaction.

The battle waged by Trotsky against the petty-bourgeois opposition in the SWP represented an imperishable contribution to the development of Marxism. The documents of this struggle are available in a volume entitled *In Defense of Marxism*.

The political turn by these elements took place in the context of a series of catastrophic defeats for the international working class, the apparent strengthening of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, and the onset of another world war. Their rejection of the defense of the Soviet Union was bound up with the rejection of a revolutionary and internationalist perspective. Disillusioned with the prospects of the working class extending the October 1917 revolution and putting an end to capitalism on a world scale, they adopted the grim perspective of a new totalitarianism, which they saw extending for an entire epoch.

Trotsky’s prediction of the political trajectory of this opposition within the SWP was quickly borne out. Burnham moved very rapidly to the right, rejecting socialism, soon voicing support for atomic war against the Soviet Union and then becoming a leading ideologist on William F. Buckley’s *National Review* magazine.

Shachtman’s turn to the right was somewhat less abrupt. He continued to claim adherence to socialism and even the Fourth International for nearly another decade. At the time of his split with the SWP, he remained personally devoted to Trotsky. For his part, Trotsky rejected Shachtman’s path unconditionally. In April 1940, just four months before his death, he declared: “If this be Trotskyism then I at least am no Trotskyist...Had conscious agents of the class enemy operated through Shachtman, they could not have advised him to do anything different from what he himself has perpetrated.”

By 1950 and the outbreak of the Korean war, Trotsky’s warnings about the trajectory of Shachtman and his followers were fully confirmed when they supported the US military intervention. The SWP, in the teeth of the McCarthyite witch-hunt, opposed the US aggression and demanded the withdrawal of all US troops from Korea.

Moving steadily to the right, Shachtman became a key advisor of the anti-communist AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the US State Department. He cemented political alliances with Cold War Democratic Party liberals such as Henry “Scoop” Jackson, the hawkish Democrat from the state of Washington who was known as the “Senator from Boeing” for his championing of the military industrial complex. Jackson was an intransigent opponent of every arms treaty with the USSR and a persistent advocate of trade sanctions against Moscow. He spearheaded the campaign to use the issue of Soviet Jews as a weapon in the Cold War and was an unconditional supporter of the Israeli state.

In 1972, Shachtman, as an open anti-communist and supporter of both the Vietnam War and Zionism, backed Jackson in the Democratic presidential primary. The Shachtmanites, who had changed their name from the Workers Party to the Independent Socialist League in the early 1950s, later entered the dwindling ranks of the American Socialist Party, and eventually renamed themselves the Social Democrats USA.

Paul Wolfowitz, who is today the number two official at the Pentagon, and Doug Feith, an undersecretary of defense, as well as Richard Perle, a key Pentagon adviser—all prominent advocates of the war against Iraq—are former Democrats who worked for Jackson in the 1970s. Another Jackson protégé, Elliot Abrams, has been placed in charge of White House policy on the Middle East.

Whatever connection these elements may have had with Shachtman were the result not of the latter's former connection to Trotskyism, but rather their agreement with the politics of anti-communism, militarism and Zionism that Shachtman had embraced over the course of some three decades following his break with the Fourth International.

In Shachtman's political evolution—a descent into reaction by someone who had played a leading role in the building of the socialist movement and the defense of Trotsky against Stalinist persecution—there is an element of tragedy. Irving Kristol, on the other hand, began his turn to the right as a political cipher, having spent an extremely brief period in association with the American Trotskyists.

Kristol has nonetheless traded on that early and, from a political and historical standpoint, accidental association with Trotskyism in his climb up the ladder of right-wing think tanks. His son, William Kristol, is the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, a mouthpiece of the Republican right.

There is no doubt that both Shachtman and Kristol used political skills that they had gained in the Marxist movement to further the cause of reaction. Far from being responsible for the political evolution of these individuals, however, the Trotskyist movement fought out the political differences and rejected the opportunist tendency they represented long before it had evolved into an open supporter of US imperialism. The subsequent political path of Shachtman and Kristol only vindicated the objective significance of the struggle of Marxism against opportunism.

Throughout its history, the Trotskyist movement has been subjected to a continuous barrage of dishonest denunciations and vilification from both Stalinist and capitalist reaction. But to claim that somehow Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution is the foundation for a policy of "Permanent Conquest" advocated by Washington today is one of the grossest fabrications yet.

Trotsky elaborated his theory of Permanent Revolution as a world-historical conception of the relationship between the Russian revolution and the world revolution; between the democratic and socialist tasks posed in the backward countries and the role of the working class as the sole consistently revolutionary class in modern society. Embraced in practice by Lenin in 1917, this theory became the guiding perspective of the Russian Revolution itself.

With the bureaucratic degeneration of the USSR, Trotsky defended his thesis—that the problems of the Soviet Union, and all other fundamental problems confronting humanity, could be resolved only on the level of the world economy and through the development of the international revolutionary struggle—against Stalin's retrograde theory of "socialism in one country."

To draw some connection between these revolutionary conceptions and the policy of plunder pursued by the Bush administration by means of a journalistic turn of phrase is a travesty of historical or political analysis, and only serves to obscure the ideological roots of the neoconservative movement. Those who at one point had some connection with socialist ideas and ultimately came to support Reaganism and now Bush did so by repudiating Marxism, along with the ideal of social equality and opposition to imperialist aggression. They could not be more removed from and hostile to the revolutionary perspective of Trotsky.

Trotskyism remains the authentic contemporary representative of international socialism. Anyone familiar with the work of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which reflects the views of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is well aware that it has taken the most intransigent stand against US aggression abroad and the policies of repression and social reaction within the US. The foundation for the socialist and internationalist politics of the WSWs lies in the Trotskyist movement's continuous struggle against revisionist tendencies—including Shachtmanism—that ultimately reflect the pressure of hostile class forces upon the revolutionary party of the working class.



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