The political economy of American militarism

Part 1

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Below we are publishing the first part of the opening report to the World Socialist Web Site *and Socialist Equality Party Conference "Political Lessons of the War on Iraq: the way forward for the international working class" held on July 5-6 in Sydney, Australia. The report was delivered by Nick Beams, member of the WSWS International Editorial Board and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia.* Part 2 *was published on July 11.*

Three months after the US conquest of Baghdad, there is a growing realisation that the world has entered a new era. It is becoming ever clearer that the invasion of Iraq was only a phase, or an aspect, of what is a much broader strategy: the drive by the United States ruling elites, through the Bush administration, to undertake a complete reorganisation of world politics.

The conquest of Iraq forms part of a strategy that aims at global domination. We are now experiencing what Trotsky once called a "truly volcanic eruption of American imperialism". The aim of this conference is to reveal the underlying driving forces of this phenomenon, which truly opens up a new era in world history, and, on the basis of this analysis, develop a strategy and perspective for the international working class.

I shall review the fundamental economic forces at work later in this report. But at the outset we can obtain a measure or rough gauge of their strength by examining the scope, depth and extent of the lies on which the onslaught against Iraq was based.

It is not possible to detail all the lies put out by the Bush administration, repeated and embellished by its allies around the world—principally the Blair government in Britain and the Howard government in this country. But even a brief review will establish that nothing like it has been seen since the regime of Adolf Hitler.

The US has been engaged in military operations of one form or another against Iraq for the better part of 13 years. The latest phase began immediately after the September 11 attack, when key members of the administration, in particular Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, made it clear that conditions were now ripe for what had been mooted for some time—a full-scale military invasion of Iraq.

There was, however, a slight delay and Afghanistan was selected as the first target. But in the summer of 2002 the decision was made to launch an attack on Iraq and the preparations were undertaken to carry it out. The decision was taken that it was not possible to organise an invasion along the same lines as had been carried out in Afghanistan, that is, with US air power and special forces utilising armed opposition groups on the ground. There would have to be an invasion with US troops that would take some months to prepare.

In the meantime, as the troop build-up proceeded, the political preparation consisted of a campaign on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. This had three components: that the Iraqi regime possessed chemical and biological weapons which could be used in the region or even against America itself; that Iraq had nuclear weapons or at least a very advanced program to produce and deliver them; and that Iraq was working with international terrorist groups, in particular Al Qaeda, and was ready to deliver them the weapons of mass destruction.

Speaking on August 26, 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney warned that Saddam Hussein was "armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror" which could be used to "directly threaten America's friends throughout the region and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail". On September 26, 2002 Rumsfeld claimed that he had "bulletproof" evidence of the link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

On October 7 Bush, seeking war powers from Congress, delivered a major speech laying out the case for war. He claimed that Iraq had attempted to purchase high-strength aluminium tubes needed in the uranium enrichment process and that this constituted evidence that it was "reconstituting its nuclear weapons program".

That was not all. "We have also discovered through intelligence that Iraq has a growing fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that could be used to disperse chemical or biological weapons across a broad area. We are concerned that Iraq is exploring ways of using these UAVs for missions targeting the United States."

All assessments of the "aluminium tubes" showed that they were not the type that could be used in gas centrifuges. That was the conclusion reached by analysts in the State Department and the Department of Energy as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

As far as the chemical and biological weapons were concerned, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported in September 2002: "A substantial amount of Iraq's chemical warfare agents, precursors, munitions, and production equipment were destroyed between 1991 and 1998.... There is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons, or where Iraq has—or will—establish its chemical warfare agent production facilities."

But of all the lies, the most significant was that concerning the purchases of uranium from the African republic of Niger. By the end of 2002 the "aluminium tubes" story was starting to wear thin. It was necessary to produce something more substantive.

Accordingly, in his State of the Union address of January 28 this year, Bush declared: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.... Saddam Hussein has not credibly explained these activities. He clearly has much to hide."

There was, in fact, nothing to explain and the Bush administration knew it. A year earlier, in January 2002, the office of Vice President Cheney had received documents purporting to show purchases of uranium from Niger. Cheney ordered an investigation. It was conducted by a diplomat who had served as an ambassador to three African countries. In February 2002 the diplomat reported to the State Department and the CIA that the documents were forgeries. His report was circulated to the vice president.

In an article published in the *New Republic* of June 30 the former

ambassador states: “They knew the Niger story was a flat-out lie. They were unpersuasive about aluminium tubes and added this to make their case more persuasive.”

When the IAEA finally obtained the documents, after Powell had delivered his February 5 speech to the United Nations Security Council, it determined very rapidly that they were forged. But no matter. On March 16, Cheney attacked the IAEA and declared on “Meet the Press”: “We believe [Saddam] has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”

There is no question but that the Bush regime and its allies have carried out a Goebbels-like Big Lie campaign.

But in analysing the significance of this campaign we should recall that in confronting state-manufactured lies we are dealing not with an ethical or moral issue, but with a political phenomenon.

The use of the lie arises from the nature of the state itself. The capitalist state presents itself as the embodiment of the interests of society as a whole. But in a society divided into classes, with irreconcilable interests, this is a fiction. It is one, however, which can be maintained with a certain degree of plausibility when the ruling class is able to pursue policies of compromise and social reform.

The fact that lying has now become an integral component of the *modus operandi* of the state signifies that the interests of the ruling class—and the policies needed to enforce them—have come into direct conflict with the interests and needs of the broad mass of the population.

If the Bush regime were to tell the truth about its actions what would it say? That it has a program aimed at global economic and military domination by the United States; that all methods, including military ones, will be employed against those who attempt to block the achievement of its objectives, and that the purpose of the “war on terror” is not to remove pressing dangers to the American people, but rather to create the conditions at home and internationally where this program can be implemented.

The Bush administration’s National Security Strategy

Such goals cannot be openly discussed before the general population—there the lie rules supreme. But they do have to be discussed and worked over among the ruling elites, and so, within official documents and the publications of various think tanks, we find a remarkably frank assessment of US strategy.

The National Security Strategy, the centrepiece of the foreign policy perspective of the Bush administration published in September last year, makes clear that the resources of the world are to be subordinated to US economic interests and that military power will be used to establish and maintain what amounts to a global empire.

The great struggles of the twentieth century, the document begins, have ended with the victory of freedom, establishing only one sustainable model for success: “freedom, democracy and free enterprise.” Accordingly, the Bush administration commits itself to bringing the hope of “democracy, development, free markets and free trade to every corner of the world.”

The objective of global domination is spelled out on the first page: “The US national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.”

This project will not be undertaken, however, simply for the material benefit of US interests. It is for the good of the world because it so happens that the US “free market” agenda is the only “sustainable model” for global development—a truly happy coincidence.

Such happy coincidences have been seen before. The “empire of free trade” under which Great Britain organised its global dominance in the nineteenth century was bound up with the great “civilising mission” it had undertaken. Now we are to have an empire of “freedom” in which the “free market” is defined as the very basis of morality itself.

In the words of the National Security Strategy: “The concept of ‘free trade’ arose as a moral principle even before it became a pillar of economics. If you can make something that others value, you should be able to sell it to them. If others make something that you value, you should be able to buy it. This is real freedom, the freedom for a person—or a nation—to make a living” (p. 18).

It is doubtful if “freedom” has ever been defined quite so explicitly as the “freedom to make money” and this then made the basis of morality. Of course when the document speaks of persons buying and selling it must be remembered that these “individuals” are not those whom the philosopher John Locke had in mind at the end of the seventeenth century. Rather, they consist of gigantic “legal persons”—transnational corporations commanding wealth and resources beyond the scope not only of individuals but entire countries.

But “free markets” and “free trade,” which the document insists are “key priorities of our national security,” do not, in and of themselves, guarantee the pre-eminence of the United States. What is to be done about potential rivals?

Here the document is very explicit. American dominance will be maintained through overwhelming military power.

“It is time to reaffirm the essential role of American military strength. We must build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge” (p. 29). In other words, the other major capitalist powers should not even contemplate seeking to change the balance of power at some point in the future. “Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in the hopes of surpassing, or equalling the power of the United States” (p. 30).

Such a doctrine had been espoused a decade earlier in the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) document prepared in the Pentagon by Paul Wolfowitz and Defense Secretary Dick Cheney during the previous Bush administration. However, when the details were leaked it caused such a furore that the document had to be withdrawn and rewritten. There were two major objections: the DPG made all too clear that the US was prepared to move outside its post-war alliances and that it was pursuing an agenda of global dominance.

While the document was withdrawn, the perspective behind it was not, leading a kind of subterranean existence for almost a decade. It was the strategy that dare not speak its name. Not, at least, until the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

“The events of September 11, 2001,” the National Security Strategy document states, “fundamentally changed the context for relations between the United States and other main centers of global power, and opened vast, new opportunities” (p. 28).

On any reading this is an amazing statement. First of all, how did the attacks of September 11 change the “context for relations” between the US and other major powers? After all, those powers declared themselves in full solidarity with the US, even invoking hitherto unused clauses of the NATO agreement. What the document meant was that it was now possible to invoke the unilateralism that had been at the centre of the DPG strategy of 1992.

Secondly, what “vast new opportunities” were opened up? How were these attacks beneficial? In one decisive way: they provided the opportunity for the US ruling elites to press ahead with their agenda of global domination under the banner of the “war on terror” and to develop measures to suppress opposition to this agenda at home.

Lest anyone suspect that this is a somewhat biased presentation and that I am perhaps overstating the case, let me turn briefly to an informative analysis of the Bush doctrine and the foreign policy issues confronting the

United States provided by one of its most right-wing supporters, the American Enterprise Institute.

In an article published on January 31, 2003 Thomas Donnelly, one of the leading lights of that body, wrote: " ... the Bush Doctrine represents a return to the first principles of American security strategy. The Bush doctrine also represents the realities of international politics in the post-cold-war, sole-superpower world. Further, the combination of these two factors—America's universal political principles and unprecedented global power and influence—make the Bush Doctrine a whole greater than the sum of its parts; it is likely to remain the basis for US security strategy for decades to come" (Thomas Donnelly, *The Underpinnings of the Bush Strategy*).

Donnelly then goes on to spell out its implications. The expansion of the "American perimeter" is "likely to continue, even accelerate". Having started to "reform" the politics of the Middle East it would be "difficult and dangerous to stop with half measures" (ibid).

This doctrine, he insists, is not an aberration. Rather "Americans have always taken an expansive view of their security interests and been more than willing to exercise military power where the correlation of forces is favourable" and have regarded the exercise of this power as "not simply a force for national greatness but for human liberty."

"Taken together," he continues, "American principles, interests, and systematic responsibilities, argue strongly in favour of an active and expansive stance of strategic primacy and a continued willingness to employ military force. Within that context, and given the ways in which nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction can distort normal calculations of international power relationships, there is a compelling need to hold open the option of—and indeed, to build more forces capable of—preemptive strike actions."

And what should be the grounds for taking such preemptive strike action? Virtually anything that is considered to impinge upon, or adversely affect, the interests of the United States.

"The United States," Donnelly insists, "must take a wider view of the traditional doctrine of 'imminent danger', considering how such dangers threaten not only its direct interests, but its allies, the liberal international order, and the opportunities for greater freedom in the world" (ibid).

In an article published on March 25, just after the invasion had begun, Donnelly welcomed the conflict in the United Nations Security Council that had preceded it.

"The diplomatic maneuvering preceding the war in Iraq marks the unambiguous end of the post-cold-war world. No one can say with absolute certainty how the 'post-Iraq world' will be ordered, but the fundamental contradiction of the period between 1989 and 2003—the disparity between the reality of American global primacy and the formally multipolar structure of various international institutions, most notably the United Nations and NATO—has been exposed for the sham that it has been. Ironically, the French have done us a favour by forcing the world to confront the facts of the case" (Thomas Donnelly, *An Enduring Pax Americana*).

And in a further article published on May 21 he positively celebrated the Bush doctrine which "freed us from the ingrained balance-of-power thinking of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras" and in "its rejection of containment and deterrence ... has likewise restored to prominence the historic characteristics of American national security policy: a proactive defense and the aggressive expansion of freedom" (Thomas Donnelly, *The Meaning of Operation Iraqi Freedom*).

Foreign policy under Clinton

This language indicates the tremendous forces at work. But it would be wrong to conclude that the eruption of imperialist violence can be put down simply to the Bush administration or to the so-called neo-conservatives who play such a prominent role in formulating its agenda.

Rather, the Bush regime's policies are the culmination of tendencies of development that have been steadily emerging over the past decade and a half since the collapse of the Soviet Union. They can be clearly seen in the Clinton foreign policy.

While it did not espouse Bush Snr's doctrine of the "new world order", the Clinton administration made clear that it was committed to the aggressive pursuit of American interests, if necessary at the expense of its supposed allies.

It was necessary, Clinton insisted in one of his first speeches as president, to "make trade a priority element of American security." America had to "seek to open other nations' markets and to establish clear and enforceable rules on which to expand trade" (Remarks by President Clinton at the American University Centenary Celebration, February 26, 1993).

The public furore over the Defense Planning Guidance drafted by Wolfowitz in the last days of the first Bush administration resulted in a certain caution in formulating the foreign policy agenda. But the essential issues raised in that document—the need for the US to adopt an expansionist foreign policy in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union—formed the core of the Clinton administration's agenda.

In a speech delivered in September 1993, Clinton's national security adviser Anthony Lake explained that the US stood at an historic crossroads. "[W]e have arrived at neither the end of history nor a clash of civilizations, but a moment of immense democratic and entrepreneurial opportunity. We must not waste it."

America was the dominant power in this new era, possessing the largest economy and the strongest military. "The successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies."

As for the relationship of the US to other powers, Lake made clear that American interests determined the agenda. "[O]nly one overriding factor can determine whether the US should act multilaterally or unilaterally, and that is America's interests. We should act multilaterally where doing so advances our interests—and we should act unilaterally when that will serve our purpose. The simple question in each instance is this: what works best?" (Anthony Lake, "From Containment to Enlargement", Johns Hopkins University September 21, 1993).

And increasingly military force was what worked best. As one recent study has noted "not force held in abeyance but force expanded became a hallmark of US policy in the 1990s" with Clinton's two terms producing an "unprecedented level of military activism." A national security study carried out in 1999 revealed that "since the end of the Cold War, the United States has embarked on nearly four dozen military operations ... as opposed to only 16 during the entire period of the Cold War" (Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire*, 2002, pp. 142-143).

It is instructive to examine the two most significant areas of military activity in this period: the war against Yugoslavia over Kosovo and the ongoing and increasing attacks against Iraq.

In the Kosovo war of 1999 we saw all the methods developed four years later in the invasion of Iraq. Here the Big Lie was not "weapons of mass destruction" but "ethnic cleansing" carried out by Serbian president Milosevic, transforming him into the new Hitler of Europe. It has now been established that what precipitated the flood of refugees was NATO's bombing, not the so-called ethnic cleansing campaign.

At the time, though, there were allegations of tens of thousands of deaths. US defence secretary William Cohen even claimed as many as 100,000 military-aged men were missing. Following the war, a British government memorandum stated that 10,000 people were killed in

Kosovo in 1999, with only 2000 of these deaths occurring before the bombings, most of which were the result of clashes between the Yugoslav army and the Kosovo Liberation Army.

The so-called Rambouillet text, with its provisions for NATO armed forces to move all over Yugoslavia, was drawn up with the specific aim of having it rejected by Serbia. This was later admitted by the former Canadian ambassador to Yugoslavia who stated that "the insistence of allowing access to all of Yugoslavia by NATO forces ... guaranteed a Serbian rejection." As a senior US official explained at the time, "we intentionally set the bar too high for the Serbs to comply" (Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit*, 2003 p. 147).

The war against Yugoslavia, like the onslaught against Iraq, was launched without the approval of the United Nations. But if this did not lead to denunciations of the US over its breaches of international law, it was because so-called "left" and social democratic public opinion backed the war on the grounds that intervention was necessary to prevent ethnic cleansing. The same arguments were to be repeated a few months later when the entire middle class radical movement in Australia took to the streets in protest demonstrations to demand the intervention of Australian troops in East Timor.

The new doctrine of "ethical imperialism" was articulated by British Prime Minister Tony Blair in a speech delivered in Chicago. The most pressing problem, Blair maintained, was to identify the circumstances where the major powers should undertake military intervention. "Non-interference has long being considered an important principle of international order. And it is not one we would want to jettison too readily. One state should not feel it has the right to change the political system of another or foment subversion or seize pieces of territory to which it feels it should have some claim. But the principle of non-interference must be qualified in important respects. Acts of genocide can never be a purely internal matter" (Tony Blair, Speech to the Chicago Economic Club, April 22, 1999).

Blair's lies over WMDs are a continuation of his lies over Kosovo.

In the United States, the so-called "left" and "liberal" forces who backed the war insisted that there were no economic interests involved. This was a war driven by morality—the need to halt ethnic cleansing.

As the bombing campaign was being launched, however, Clinton delivered a speech that pointed to other, economic and strategic, reasons. If anything had been learned from World War II and the Cold War, he said, it was that "if our country is going to be prosperous and secure, we need a Europe that is safe, secure, free, united, a good partner with us for trading.... And if we're going to have a strong economic relationship that includes our ability to sell around the world, Europe has got to be a key. And if we want people to share our burdens of leadership with all the problems that will inevitably crop up, Europe needs to be our partner. Now, that's what this Kosovo thing is all about" (Speech to AFSCME Biennial Convention, March 23. 1999).

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, the significance of Yugoslavia was that it lay at the western edge of a vast territory that had been opened up for imperialist penetration by the collapse of the Soviet Union. How important that region has become has been confirmed in all the subsequent events: the war against Afghanistan and the establishment of US military bases throughout central Asia and now the occupation of Iraq and the drive to re-organise the entire Middle East.

The conflicts between the US and the European powers did not begin with the current Bush administration but were a key component of US policy on Iraq under Clinton. The sanctions regime established after the first Gulf war was left in place for two reasons.

In the first place, if it were determined that Iraq had been disarmed, then the rationale for the continued presence of US forces in the region would disappear. Hence the insistence that Iraq had not complied with the UN resolutions and the organisation of continuing provocations.

Secondly, if the sanctions regime had been lifted this would have meant that Iraqi oil would come onto the market, large revenues would be generated, and new areas of exploration opened up.

None of this would have benefited the US. The rights to conduct exploration and the exploitation of new oil reserves had been given to French, Russian and Chinese companies. Moreover, reconstruction projects financed by increased oil revenues would not have gone to US corporations but to European firms. In other words, the maintenance of sanctions and the promotion of the claims of weapons of mass destruction had nothing to do with the real situation in Iraq, but arose from the deepening conflict between the US and its rivals over the exploitation of the region.

This symbiotic relationship between the military and economic interests of the United States was clearly articulated by Clinton's defense secretary William Cohen. Economists and soldiers, he claimed, shared the same interests in stability. The forward deployment of US forces in Asia, the Middle East and in Europe enabled the US to "shape the environment in ways that are advantageous to us and that are stabilizing to areas where we are forward deployed, thereby helping to promote investment and prosperity and therefore reinforcing the forces of peace and democracy." Or, as he put the matter more simply, "business follows the flag" (See Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire*, p. 128).

The historical development of US imperialism

The immediate opportunity for the US to openly deploy its military might was provided by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Viewed against the backdrop of the history of the twentieth century as a whole, however, the impact of this event was not so much a re-orientation of US foreign policy as the removal of the constraints imposed upon it during the previous seven decades. An examination of the origins and historical development of American imperialism makes this clear.

The foundations for American capitalism's rise to global prominence were securely established in the decades immediately following the Civil War and the victory of the rising industrial bourgeoisie of the North. The next thirty years saw the establishment of the giant corporation—taking the leading role in economic development from the single-owner or family business—the opening up of the entire continent to the development of capitalist industry and farming, the development of new forms of industrial production—the beginnings of the assembly-line methods that would shape the economy of the twentieth century—and, just as important, the development of new forms of corporate management.

By the end of the century American capitalism was ready to take its "place in the sun" along with the other capitalist great powers. It announced its arrival with the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the subsequent colonisation of the Philippines at the cost of 200,000 Filipino lives.

Notwithstanding the Philippines' conquest, America did not so much demand a formal empire, but rather the "open door"—the freedom of American economic interests to penetrate any part of the world. This policy reflected the position of the United States: by the time it was ready to take its place on the world stage, the globe had been carved up among the other great capitalist powers—France, Germany and, above all, the British Empire. The principles of liberty and freedom proclaimed by the rising American power therefore reflected its immediate interest in open markets and trade.

If military interventions were carried out they were aimed not at enforcing a particular American interest but to support universal principles of civilisation.

As President Theodore Roosevelt put it in December 1904 during a struggle to secure control of the Panama Canal: “It is not true that the United States feels any land hunger or entertains any projects as regards the other nations of the Western Hemisphere save such as are for their welfare. All that this country desires is to see the neighbouring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous.”

Any country that conducted itself with decency, kept order and paid its obligations need have no fear of the United States. However “chronic wrongdoing” or impotence resulting in a general loosening of the “ties of civilisation” would ultimately require “intervention by some civilised nation”. Furthermore there was no over-arching right to independence. According to Roosevelt: “It is a mere truism to say that every nation ... which desires to maintain its freedom, its independence, must ultimately realize that the right of such independence can not be separated from the responsibility of making good use of it” (See Oscar Barck ed. *America in the World*, Meridian Books 1961 p. 80).

These sentiments were widely shared by the ruling elites. As the future president Woodrow Wilson explained in a lecture delivered in 1907: “Since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed must be battered down.”

And even more than this. According to the future advocate of the self-determination of nations: “Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process” (cited in William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, p. 72).

America’s entry into the world arena was driven by its dynamic economic expansion. By the time of World War I, the US economy was dependent on the international economy as a whole. Its industries had expanded to such a point, Wilson explained during his campaign for the 1912 elections, that “they will burst their jackets if they cannot find a free outlet to the markets of the world.” Domestic markets, he insisted, no longer sufficed. America needed foreign markets. The demands of the war helped provide these markets, transforming the US from a debtor to a creditor nation.

America entered the war espousing the universal principles of freedom, the right of nations to self-determination and, above all, democracy. The reality was, however, that American industries and finance houses could not afford a loss by the allies, so great had been their financial involvement.

America’s goals were summed up with remarkable frankness by former president Roosevelt in the autumn of 1917. The US, he insisted, did not go to war to “make democracy safe”. Rather America intended to make the world “safe for ourselves”. “This is our war, America’s war. If we do not win it we shall some day have to reckon with Germany single-handed. Therefore, for our own sake let us strike down Germany” (cited in Arno Mayer, *The Political Origins of the New Diplomacy*, pp. 344-345).

US imperialism and the Soviet Union

The war saw a violent shift in the balance of power. No longer standing in the shadow of the British Empire, America had assumed the hegemony of the world capitalist system. But as it assumed leadership, capitalism entered a profound crisis.

The historical significance of the war lay in the fact that it confirmed—in the form of mass death and destruction, hunger and cold—what had already been established by Marxist theory. The system of private ownership and the capitalist nation-state, which had given such a great impetus to mankind’s development in the nineteenth century, was now historically outmoded. Under capitalism, the revolt of the global productive forces against the nation state took the form of a ruthless struggle of the great powers for mastery of the world. There could be no peaceful resolution of this conflict, Lenin explained. Any peace, no matter how long it might last, would merely be an interlude until economic development itself changed the relationships between the major capitalist powers, setting in motion a new struggle once again.

As global hegemony of the capitalist order was passing west across the Atlantic, a challenge to the entire imperialist order was emerging in the east, in the form of the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union.

The revolution brought an instinctive response from the US and the other capitalist powers. They attempted to strangle it at birth, sending in armed forces to support the Whites in the civil war, who, as Winston Churchill admitted at the time, would have been rapidly defeated were it not for the support they received from outside. The US was only held back from going further by the fear that its own soldiers would become “infected” by Bolshevism.

Over the course of the next decades the Soviet Union underwent a tremendous degeneration, beginning with the defeat of the Left Opposition in 1927 and culminating in the Moscow Trials in 1936-38, which resulted in the consolidation of power by the counter-revolutionary bureaucracy under Stalin.

But while ever it continued to exist, the Soviet Union, established by the greatest social revolution in history, constituted an obstacle to the realisation by the United States of its global ambitions.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the perspective of “rolling back” the Soviet Union was raised once again. Here it should be recalled, as the air waves resound with propaganda about how the threat of weapons of mass destruction compels pre-emptive action by the United States, that the most devastating use of such weapons—the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—was motivated not by the desire to defeat Japan—that had already taken place—but to issue a threat against the Soviet Union.

Throughout the post-war period there was an ongoing conflict within American military and ruling circles over whether the US should pursue a policy of “containment” with regard to the Soviet Union or “rollback”. The so-called containment perspective predominated—although not without attempts to launch a full-scale conflict, both in the Korean War and during the confrontation over Cuba.

As a broad generalisation, the policy of containment prevailed in the years of the post-war boom while ever the US was pursuing a policy of social reform. But as the boom came to an end, giving way to the worsening economic conditions of the 1970s, the US became more aggressive. Détente was abandoned and in the late 1970s a policy of destabilisation of the Soviet Union was launched with the massive funding and arming of the Islamic fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan. The aim, as has since been admitted by Carter’s National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski—the architect of this policy—was to drag the Soviet Union into a Vietnam-type quagmire.

In the 1980s massive increases in arms expenditure under the Reagan administration, the deployment of Cruise missiles in Europe and the Star Wars proposals were all aimed at producing a crisis in the Soviet Union and its collapse. However, even before these measures could have their full effect, the Soviet bureaucracy under Gorbachev took the decision to liquidate the USSR and organise the restoration of capitalism. For the US this was the opportunity, for the first time since its rise to global ascendancy, to realise its objectives without constraints on its use of military power.

It is therefore, perhaps, not surprising that so much of the language of the first decades of the twentieth century, when the United States was just beginning its imperial mission, should find its echo in the various

pronouncements of the Bush administration.

In January 1917 on the eve of America's entry into World War I, setting out the conditions for a just peace Wilson insisted that while the measures he proposed were American principles and policies, and could be no other, they were also "the principles and policies of forward looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community. They are the principles of mankind and must prevail."

Or as Bush put it: "The twentieth century ended with a single surviving model of human progress" and that "when it comes to the common rights and needs of men and women, there is no clash of civilizations" (Bush Graduation Speech at West Point, June 1, 2002).

Announcing America's entry into the war, in April 1917, Wilson insisted that America would fight "without rancor and without selfish object, seeking nothing for ourselves but what we shall wish to share with free peoples."

Likewise Bush declared in the National Security Strategy: "Today, the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence. In keeping with our heritage and principles, we do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage. We seek instead to create a balance of power that favours human freedom: conditions in which all nations and all societies can choose for themselves the rewards and challenges of political and economic liberty" (Bush preamble to the National Security Strategy).