

Nick Beams addresses Australian public meetings

The Iraq war and the international working class

Nick Beams
4 June 2004

The following speech was delivered by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and a member of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board, to public meetings in Sydney and Melbourne on May 30 and June 3.

The raid last Thursday week on the Baghdad home and offices of Ahmed Chalabi, at one time the US favourite to head a puppet regime in Iraq, has touched off a bitter conflict within the Bush regime.

So open are the divisions between the various arms of the state that *New York Times* columnist William Safire recently noted that the three factions controlling Iraq—not the Sunnis, Kurds, and Shiites, but the Pentagon, State Department and the CIA—were now “on the brink of open tribal warfare”.

Chalabi, who sat on the right hand of Laura Bush during a State of the Union address, and was once dubbed the George Washington of a new Iraq, is now linked to charges of kidnapping, murder, torture, embezzlement and even spying for Iran. The target is not just Chalabi but those who promoted him in the American state apparatus.

In an article published last Thursday in the *Guardian*, Sidney Blumenthal, a former adviser to Clinton, pointed out that FBI agents have been paying calls on prominent neoconservatives in an espionage investigation aimed at uncovering who provided Chalabi with sensitive information about US government plans. Here is how Blumenthal described the scene in the US capital.

“Washington, just weeks ago in the grip of neoconservative orthodoxy, absolute belief in Bush’s inevitability and righteousness, is in the throes of being ripped apart by investigations. Things fall apart: the military, loyal and lumbering, betrayed and embittered; the general in the field, General Sanchez, disgraced and cashiered; the intelligence agencies abused and angry, their operatives plying their craft with the press corps, seeping dangerous truths; the press, hesitating and wobbly, investigating its own falsehoods; the neocons, publicly redoubling defence of their hero and deceiver Chalabi, privately squabbling, anxiously awaiting the footsteps of FBI agents; Colin Powell, once the most acclaimed man in America, embarked on an endless quest to restore his reputation, damaged above all by his failure of nerve; everyone in the line of fire motioning toward the chain of command, spiralling upwards and sideways, until the finger pointing in a phalanx is directed at the hollow crown.”

It would take a master dramatist of the calibre of Shakespeare to undertake an artistic depiction of the intrigues and conflicts now unfolding in Washington. Shakespeare himself would soon find his bearings, recognising in the present-day cast of characters many of the social types he brought to life.

And if the name of Shakespeare comes to mind as we consider the scene in Washington, it is because there are certain parallels between his time and ours.

He wrote in a period of great turmoil and political upheaval in the old state structures, arising from the impact upon them of vast economic changes following the discovery of the New World and the opening up of new trading ventures.

No less today, the crisis of the Bush regime is rooted in the vast changes taking place in the very structure of world capitalism—in many ways the culmination of processes which began in Shakespeare’s time—but which have now come into conflict with the old political framework.

Just as in Shakespearean drama a ghost often plays an important role, warning of impending doom, so it is in this real-life conflict. Former vice-president Al Gore, his presidential bid killed off in December 2000 by the decision of a corrupt Supreme Court, has come back from the political dead, entering the political spotlight last Wednesday with a sweeping denunciation of the Bush regime.

According to Gore, the war in Iraq is the “worst strategic fiasco in the history of the United States” and an “unfolding catastrophe without any comparison”. The abuse of prisoners, he insisted, was the result of the abuse of truth that characterised the administration’s march to war, and Bush had now created more anger and indignation against America than any other president in the 228-year history of the nation.

For Gore, a scion of the ruling class, who does have some understanding of history and politics, the tortures at Abu Ghraib are at the very centre of this catastrophe, because they undermine the ideology which has played such a central role in maintaining the global position of the United States.

When the US embarked on the road to global dominance, in the Spanish American War, Secretary of State Elihu Root explained in 1899 that the American soldier was different from those of all other countries because he was “the advance guard of liberty and justice, of law and order and of peace and happiness.” Likewise, Woodrow Wilson declared in World War I that America was “chosen, and prominently chosen, to show the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty”.

Writing on this phenomenon in the 1920s, Leon Trotsky explained that while American imperialism was “in essence ruthlessly rude, predatory ... and criminal,” the special conditions of development of the US had allowed it to present itself as pacifist. Indeed, the pacifist mask had become “so glued on the imperialist visage that it cannot be torn off”.

Now it has been ripped apart, revealing the bared fangs of the beast beneath.

It is clear that the tortures carried out at Abu Ghraib, and earlier in Afghanistan, as well as those which are ongoing at Guantanamo Bay, have not arisen as the result of decisions taken by low-ranking soldiers. They flow right from the top of the American political and military establishment. They represent the outcome of decisions taken at the very heart of the Bush administration that international conventions on torture, war crimes, and treatment of prisoners, set in place under the so-called

Geneva Conventions following World War II in response to the criminal activities of the Nazi regime, should be thrown aside.

In late January 2002, following the launching of the war against Afghanistan, the White House legal counsel, Alberto Gonzales, called on the Bush administration to exempt US forces from the provisions of the Geneva Conventions. Gonzales wrote to Bush: "As you have said, the war on terrorism is a new kind of war... In my judgement, this new paradigm renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions."

The Bush administration declared that detainees were no longer prisoners of war but "unlawful combatants" and therefore not covered by the Geneva Conventions.

At the same time, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, assisted by his Undersecretary for Intelligence Stephen Cambone, established a Special Access Program. Initially the purpose of the SAP was to carry out rapid assassinations of targets. But its operations were extended to Iraq when it became apparent, from the summer of 2003, that the US occupation was meeting growing resistance. It was decided that "detention operations must act as an enabler for interrogation". The head of the Guantanamo Bay camp, Major General Geoffrey Miller, was brought in to establish the new detention regime in Iraq. We have seen some of the results in the press and media coverage during the past weeks.

The torture of the prisoners is not an isolated phenomenon, but a product of the war itself—the lies upon which it was founded, and the designation of the enemy as somehow less than human—subhuman or *Untermensch*, as the Nazis would have put it.

Listen to the words of the *Wall Street Journal*, which famously declared during the first Gulf War that "force works". "Sooner or later," it declared on April 26, "the Baath remnants, jihadists, and criminals who have used Fallujah as a sanctuary have to be killed. They can't be bargained with. They can't be reasoned with." And then there was the commentary from CNN security analyst Ken Robinson, on April 27. Here is his description of the Jolan district in Fallujah, one of the strongholds of the insurgents: "You can almost refer to it as a cockroach nest for the insurgency because it's a poverty-stricken part of town where they've been able to move with impunity." What do you do with such "cockroaches?" Wipe them out with the aid of helicopter gunships.

But as significant as the torture in revealing the rot and decay lying at the very heart of the American state, was the reaction to it. Within days of the media revelations, Republican Senator James Inhofe was declaring his outrage at the outrage. The prisoners were murderers, terrorists, insurgents and "here we're so concerned about the treatment of those individuals". Others have blamed the "liberal media".

And it was not long before the US response was emulated here. Writing in the *Australian* of May 14, columnist Frank Devine declared that Rumsfeld's connection with the abuse was "remote" and that, in any case, he had "reached my outrage limit so far as the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib is concerned". Any attempt to suggest that the torture showed that the American mission in Iraq was "malign and futile ... perverts reason". Moreover, he asked, who would not have been involved, who would not succumb "to the aberrant strains in our nature, if secluded with other, hostile, alien human beings totally in our power?"

As far as columnist Janet Albrechtsen was concerned it was all the fault of "media bias". Looking back on the horrors of Nazi Germany, one sometimes wonders how it was that Hitler could find supporters in the media. Were they perverted types, deformed from birth? Not at all. They were rather like Ms Albrechtsen: well-paid individuals, attracted to power and those who wield it, and who understand that their well-being is bound up with the maintenance of the prevailing order.

According to Ms Albrechtsen, the "skewed reporting" of Iraq raises the question of whether Western nations can successfully wage war. "If Adolf Hitler were rampaging through Europe now, would we have the stomach

to fight him, to accept the carnage inevitably required to defeat him? Or would media images of our own brutality cause us to surrender?"

Albrechtsen's imagery is, of course, completely upside down. It is the Bush regime and its allies that are playing the part of Hitler, having planned and executed an aggressive war, the central crime for which the Nazis were convicted at the Nuremberg Trials. And given that they are waging the same kind of war, it is hardly surprising that the antecedents of the decisions taken by Bush and Rumsfeld are to be found in the war plans of the Nazis.

On March 30, 1941, three months before the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler told army commanders that the war in the east would be very different from that in the west, and that they should overcome all their personal scruples. In May 1941, specific instructions were issued that soldiers were not to be prosecuted for criminal actions against civilians, and that collective reprisals could be carried out against villages where there was resistance. Another draft order, reflecting Hitler's demand for the elimination of the "Jewish Bolshevik intelligentsia," specified that commissars attached to the Red Army "are not recognised as soldiers" and therefore that "the provisions valid for prisoners of war are not applicable". Ten days before the invasion, a leading general briefed army officers that "legal sensibilities" would not apply and that they had to give way to the necessities of war. [Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, pp. 218-222]

In pointing to these parallels, I am not suggesting that history simply repeats itself. But it does rhyme, and there are deep resonances.

The war of aggression carried out by Nazi Germany, and, above all, its invasion of the East, were not the products of the fevered brain of Adolf Hitler. The achievement of *Lebensraum*, living space, had long been a strategic objective of German imperialism. In fact, the formation of an economic *Mittleuropa* under German hegemony, capable of providing the economic resources it needed to find its place in the sun alongside Britain and the United States, had been drawn up almost 30 years before, in the lead-up to World War I.

In launching the war in the East, Hitler declared that the conquered regions of the Soviet Union would become "our India," a recognition that empire was the key to Britain's power, and that empire was necessary for the expansion of German capitalism.

Likewise, the war drive of the United States is not simply a product of Bush and his administration of neo-conservatives, but has its roots in economic contradictions wracking US and world capitalism. The roots of the US war drive lie in the contradiction at the heart of world capitalism: that between the globalised, unified character of production and the division of the world into conflicting, rival national states.

The election statement of the US Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained this process as follows:

"The unprecedented integration and interdependence of the world economy—the phenomenon known as globalisation—is incompatible with the nation-state system upon which capitalism is based. The violent eruption of American imperialism—which finds its essential expression in the Bush administration's doctrine of preemptive war—represents a desperate attempt to resolve the contradiction between world economy and the nation state by establishing the hegemony of one country—namely, the United States—over all other countries."

This issue has not emerged overnight. It has been the central pre-occupation of the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 saw the disintegration of the political framework through which international relations had been regulated in the post-war period. The end of the Cold War meant that all the old issues of global hegemony—of the conflicts between great capitalist powers and their striving for spheres of influence, if not actual empires, that had led to two world wars in the first four decades of the twentieth century—were right back on the agenda.

The new political reality was to receive rapid acknowledgement in the

Defense Planning Guidance document drafted in 1992 in the final period of the Bush senior administration. This document, drawn up by Paul Wolfowitz, now deputy defense secretary, working under the then defense secretary and now vice-president Dick Cheney, set out the central strategic task of the United States in the new world situation. Above all, the document insisted, in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, the US had to prevent the emergence of any power or combination of powers that could challenge its global position, militarily, economically or politically. Because it too bluntly set out the strategic tasks, the document itself was withdrawn but its essential themes were laid out again in 1998 by the Project for a New American Century, the right-wing grouping that has shaped the perspectives of the Bush administration, and formed the core of Bush's National Security Strategy issued in September 2002.

Such positions were also advanced from the Democratic side of US politics. In April 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser in the Carter administration, set out the strategic objectives of the US as follows: "[T]he issue of how America copes with the complex Eurasian power relationships—and particularly whether it prevents the emergence of a dominant and antagonistic Eurasian power—remains central to America's capacity to exercise global primacy" [Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, pp. xiii-xiv].

These broad global issues came to a head over the question of Iraq and how to proceed after the Gulf War. The US had imposed a series of sanctions upon the regime of Saddam Hussein. It soon became clear, however, that the lifting of these sanctions, and the return of Iraq to normal economic relations with the rest of the world, would conflict with the wider strategic aims of the US in the new post-Cold War world. In particular, a return to economic normalcy would see European, Russian, Japanese and even Chinese economic interests moving in to develop the vast oil resources of the country, the second largest reserves after those of Saudi Arabia.

Hence, the US insisted that the sanctions remain and be strengthened. In the meantime, the Saddam Hussein regime signed contracts for future oil exploration and development with French, Russian and Chinese companies.

By the late 1990s the situation was becoming intolerable. The sanctions regime was coming under increasing pressure from the European powers, which wanted to begin the development of the Iraqi oil resources. What would have happened if sanctions had been lifted? Very rapidly European interests would have begun to assume control of the second largest oil supplies in the Middle East, while the US would have been shut out. Such an option could not be countenanced. At the same time, it was clear the sanctions regime could not be maintained indefinitely.

There was only one way to cut this Gordian knot in the interests of the US. That was to undertake "regime change" in Iraq itself and install a puppet government, thereby ensuring that European powers did not acquire a new power base in the Middle East. The removal of Saddam Hussein and the installation of a puppet regime would enhance the global position of the US and, above all, strengthen its hand against its European and Asian rivals.

Regime change became official US policy, not under Bush, but during the Clinton administration. But the vexed question remained: how to implement it? The terror attacks of September 2001 provided the opportunity. In the immediate aftermath, Rumsfeld insisted that Iraq had to be attacked, while Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice explained that September 11 represented an enormous opportunity for the United States, which had to be seized while the tectonic plates were still in motion.

This is the origin of the war on Iraq. It had nothing to do with weapons of mass destruction, bringing democracy to the Middle East, or dealing with the terrible dictator Saddam Hussein. It was not so much concerned with Saddam Hussein, as with the European powers. Had Saddam Hussein

remained in power and the sanctions lifted, the European powers would have benefited at the expense of the United States. Such an outcome had to be prevented at all costs and that is why the invasion was undertaken, part of a global strategy to ensure the dominance of the US.

In launching war against Iraq, the US was able to use its overwhelming military superiority. But, intoxicated with the success of their swift military victory, the Bush administration and its acolytes in the media were totally unprepared for the development of opposition, both within Iraq and internationally.

The global demonstrations of February 15, 2003 had been unable to prevent the war taking place. But the opposition to the US did not disappear. It reasserted itself in the Spanish election. In the calculations of the Aznar government all it needed to do in the wake of the Madrid training bombing was to invoke the threat of terror to secure electoral victory. It miscalculated and its defeat at the polls sent a tremor through all the governments of the Iraq coalition, witnessed by the near-hysterical claims that the Spanish people had capitulated to the threat of terror.

Within Iraq, the plan was for military action to defeat the militia groups of Al Sadr, and to crush resistance in Fallujah in preparation for the handover to a puppet regime on June 30. That plan backfired badly. Rather than defeat the opposition, the US actions have led to a growing insurgency. And with the growth of the insurgency have come ever more strident warnings from sections of the military and the media about the disaster course set by the Bush administration.

Some of the most widely quoted comments came from General Anthony Zinni who, from 1997 to 2000, was commander-in-chief of all American forces in the Middle East. Denouncing the claims of the Bush administration that it will "stay the course," Zinni insisted that "the course is headed over Niagara Falls". In the lead up to the war and its later conduct, he wrote, there was "at a minimum, true dereliction, negligence and irresponsibility, at worse, lying, incompetence and corruption".

Zinni's comments have been echoed by another former commander in the Middle East, General Joseph Hoar, who declared: "I believe we are absolutely on the brink of failure. We are looking into the abyss." And the present commander of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division in Iraq, Major General Charles Swannack, has stated: "We are losing public support regionally, internationally and within America—thus, currently, we are losing strategically."

These comments from the military have prompted expressions of concern in the mass media. A recent comment in the *Washington Post* by an associate editor Robert G. Kaiser was headlined "A Foreign Policy, Falling Apart". Kaiser listed a series of disasters for US foreign policy: new hatred of the US, while traditional allies have been alienated; instead of being greeted as liberators in Iraq the US has created a crisis of still-growing dimensions; the occupation cannot even protect those who agree to work with it; and it has damaged the good name of the US in every corner of the world, has cost unanticipated scores of billions (all of it borrowed) and threatened long-term damage to the structure of the Army and the National Guard.

On the eve of World War II, Trotsky described the ruling classes as tobogganing "with closed eyes towards an economic and military catastrophe". In describing the present situation, *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote: "There's a terrible sense of dread filtering across America at the moment and it's not simply because of the continuing fear of terrorism and the fact that the nation is at war. It's more frightening than that. It grows out of the suspicion that we may all be passengers in a vehicle that has made a radically wrong turn and is barreling along a dark road, with its headlights off and with someone behind the wheel who may not know how to drive."

The criticism of Zinni and others is that the invasion of Iraq, as undertaken by the Bush administration, has weakened, not strengthened, the position of the United States because insufficient forces have been

deployed. Asked in a recent interview what course should be followed, Zinni said the United Nations should have been involved from the beginning. "What does it take to sit down with the members of the Security Council, the permanent members, and find out what it takes? What is it they want to get this resolution? Do they want a say in political reconstruction? Do they want a piece of the pie economically? If that's the cost, fine. What they're gonna pay for up front is boots on the ground and involvement in sharing the burden."

Zinni's criticisms form the basis of the Democratic Party's opposition to Bush. This is not a difference over the strategic goal of the Bush administration—to maintain and strengthen the global dominance of the US—but over tactics, how to achieve it.

Towards the end of last year, the leaders of the Democratic Party, having secured the vote in Congress backing Bush's decision to launch war against Iraq, became concerned over the support that presidential contender Howard Dean was winning because he was perceived as being an opponent of the war and critical of the Democratic Party's closeness to the Bush administration.

A decision was taken to ensure that opposition to the Iraq war was taken off the agenda at the presidential election and that the Democratic Party policy would not criticise Bush from the left, but from the right.

Their positions were outlined in a document entitled "Progressive Internationalism" released last October. It called for the Democratic Party to be reconnected to its "proud tradition of muscular internationalism". This was a reference to the fact that all the major wars of the US in the twentieth century—World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam—have been conducted under Democratic presidents. The document made it clear that it was opposed to the Republicans' go-it-alone policy, which had stretched US resources.

The paper explained that the Democratic Party supported the invasion of Iraq, and the "bold exercise of American power". While some were critical that the Bush administration had been too radical in casting America's national security strategy, "we believe it has not been ambitious or imaginative enough". Accordingly, the document continued, "Democrats will maintain the world's most capable and technologically advanced military, and we will not flinch from using it to defend our interests anywhere in the world."

When the Democratic primaries began in January, there was a sustained campaign to ensure that Dean's campaign was derailed and Kerry installed as the presumptive Democratic Party nominee. The aim of this campaign was to ensure that the war was not an election issue.

Kerry has made this central to his campaign. Writing in the *Washington Post*, in the second week of the current insurgency, he stated that, not only would there be no withdrawal of US forces, but they would be increased if necessary.

So far as the Democrats are concerned, victory in Iraq is a matter of the highest national importance. On May 19, Democrat Senator Joe Lieberman and Republican Senator John McCain wrote a comment for the *Washington Post* insisting that America not be diverted from its course in the wake of the "mistakes made at Abu Ghraib".

"On the security side, we must begin with an immediate and significant increase in our troop levels. We should sharply increase the number of troops, including Marines and Special Operations forces, to conduct offensive operations..." The "retreat" from Fallujah had "emboldened" the insurgents. "Our troops can display full resolve only by exercising the military action necessary to back up the words of political authorities. Part of this determination must be a quick end to all independent militias in Iraq."

A comment published in last Sunday's *Washington Post* by Ivo Daalder, a member of the National Security Council in the Clinton Administration, and James Lindsay, vice president of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, is illustrative of the policies being developed in the Democratic

Party.

The answer, they wrote, to Bush's unilateralism is not a return to the United Nations. The deeper problem with the UN is that it treats members as sovereign equals, irrespective of their governments.

"The idea of sovereign equality reflected a conscious decision governments made 60 years ago that they would be better off if they repudiated the right to meddle in the internal affairs of others. That choice no longer makes sense. In an era of rapid globalisation, internal developments in distant states affect our own well-being. That is what September 11 taught us. Today respect for state sovereignty should be conditional on how states behave at home, not just abroad."

In other words, the waging of aggressive war—the war crime committed by the regime of Nazi Germany—must become the foundation of the new foreign policy doctrine of the United States in this era of globalisation. In place of the Bush program of unilateralism, these writers advocate that such intervention should be conducted by an alliance of "democratic states," that is, the main imperialist powers together with their allies. Of course, the pre-eminent role of US imperialism is not in question—it should, at least for the present, have the position of first among equals.

The drive for global domination arises from the deepest needs of US imperialism. Therefore, foreign policy, domestic policies, the legal framework within the United States itself must be completely recast to reflect the fact that the accumulation of capital, and the struggle for markets, resources and profits which it entails, takes place on a truly global scale.

This means that the colonialism, imperialist oppression, wars of aggression and wars between the major capitalist powers that marked the first half of the twentieth century, have returned in a new, and even more terrible, form. How is the working class—the working masses of the world, the vast bulk of humanity—to confront this reality? That is the political question of the hour that must now be tackled.

War, as the aphorism of Clausewitz puts it, is the continuation of politics by other means. And politics, in the final analysis, is concentrated economics. War cannot be separated from the economic and social system that gives rise to it.

This fact has far-reaching political implications. It means that the struggle against imperialist war cannot be conducted on the basis of a perspective that seeks the replacement of one bourgeois party with another. Rather, it requires the development of an independent political movement of the international working class—the broad mass of humanity on a global scale—whose goal is the overthrow of the entire capitalist mode of production.

There is a relentless logic to politics, arising from the objective laws of the class struggle. Either a political struggle for the independence of the working class, or a perspective which will, inevitably, lead into the camp of one, or another, section of the capitalist ruling class.

In so-called "normal" times, these laws of politics are often somewhat covered over. In times of war, however, every political tendency is tested out and the inner logic of its program is revealed.

Take the very instructive case of Noam Chomsky. On March 16, Professor Chomsky came forward with another serving of the "lesser evil" argument in order to call for a vote for John Kerry in the US presidential election. "Kerry," he told the *Guardian*, "is sometimes described as Bush-lite, which is not inaccurate, and in general the political spectrum is pretty narrow in the United States, and elections are mostly bought, as the population knows. But despite the limited differences, both domestically and internationally, there are differences. And in this system of immense power, small differences can translate into large outcomes."

There are, as we have seen, differences between the Democratic and Republican Party. In the case of Iraq, the central claim of the Democrats candidate John Kerry is that the US is not deploying sufficient force to carry out the successful occupation of Iraq. Chomsky now aligns himself

with Kerry, as does another radical critic of the Bush administration, Michael Moore, who has declared that he intends to devote the rest of the year to securing his victory.

What is it about Chomsky's politics that leads him into the Kerry camp? For more than 30 years, stretching back to the time of the Vietnam War, Chomsky has been a critic of American imperialism. But throughout his life, Chomsky has maintained a deep and abiding opposition to the Marxism and, above all, to the Russian Revolution of 1917, which he denounces as a coup carried out against the working class.

Chomsky sees as central to his political role the exposure of the lies of the American ruling class and, at times, he does offer some insights. But he swallows the biggest lie of all, promoted by all defenders of imperialism within the academic world and across the mass media, that the Russian Revolution was some kind of putsch, and that Bolshevism was the origin of Stalinism.

It is this lie, above all, which plays such a crucial role in maintaining the political confusion and disorientation that characterises the present political situation. Having rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, setting himself against the first attempt to construct a socialist society, Chomsky necessarily ends up in the camp of one part of the ruling establishment.

The Chomsky case has a wider significance. It reveals the logic of all forms of middle class radicalism and protest politics, which objects to certain aspects of imperialism, but rejects a struggle to overthrow it, based on the independence of the working class.

The same issues of "lesser evilism" will arise in the forthcoming Australian election, where the argument will be advanced that it is necessary to vote for the Labor Party in opposition to Howard, even while, as Chomsky advocates in relation to Kerry, holding one's nose.

The Labor Party, however, is not an opponent of the war against Iraq and the US occupation. By and large, it shares the opinion of the US Democrats that where imperialist plunder is to be carried out it should be organised through that "thieves' kitchen," otherwise known as the United Nations, or some other multilateral body.

What of the Greens who featured so prominently on the platforms of the demonstrations in February last year leading up to the invasion of Iraq? They maintained that the alternative to war was the so-called "containment" program of sanctions under the UN—sanctions that had led to the death of up to half a million Iraqi children. Insofar as they oppose Australian military involvement in Iraq, it is on the basis that Australian troops should be deployed closer to home to protect the national interest. These views are echoed on their left by the so-called Socialist Alliance and radicals such as the journalist John Pilger.

It is an axiom of Marxist politics that the true test of every tendency that claims to be "anti-imperialist" is where they stand in relationship to the imperialism of their own ruling class.

Five years ago, we received the definitive answer to that question when all the radical groups here undertook a political campaign to demand the deployment of Australian troops as part of a so-called peace-keeping force in East Timor.

They claimed this was necessary to defend the East Timorese masses against the depredations inflicted on them by the Indonesian militia. However, the real purpose of the intervention, which the radicals claim was forced on Howard by the pressure they exerted, was to place Australian imperialism in the best position to grab the lion's share of the oil resources lying under the seas surrounding the island. Today we hear the government of East Timor issuing almost daily warnings that they face impoverishment because of the refusal of the Australian government to redraw the sea boundaries in line with international conventions.

The Howard government has backed the US in the war on Iraq in return for support, as it pursues the objectives of Australian imperialism within this region.

But much as the ruling classes of the United States and its imperialist allies would like to bring about the return of colonialism, the tides of history are running against them.

In an article published in the *Australian* on Friday, the British historian Niall Ferguson, a fervent defender of the virtues of the British empire, wonders why the Americans seem so incapable of carrying out in the twenty-first century what the British were able to achieve in the nineteenth. The answer is simple: the twentieth century, for all its trials and tribulations, has not been lived in vain. It is not possible to turn the clock back.

Today, the deepening contradictions of the capitalist mode of production are not only giving rise to imperialism and war, but are setting in motion even more powerful forces.

The struggles of the masses—in the oppressed countries and in the advanced capitalist countries alike—not the military might of the old ruling classes, are the most decisive factor in the historical process.

Those struggles have only begun, but already the effects have been far-reaching. More powerful political upheavals and conflicts will follow. Their final outcome will depend above all on the construction of a new revolutionary leadership, grounded on all the lessons of the twentieth century. That is the task to which the SEP and the WSWS is dedicated. We invite all of you here to take it up by joining our party.



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