

David North denounces Iraq war at Dublin debate

David North
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The Philosophical Society of Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland held its annual debate on American foreign policy on the evening of October 14. The proposition debated before an audience of more than 200 people was: "This House Believes that America is Still the World's Peacekeeper."

World Socialist Web Site Chairman David North, invited by the Philosophical Society to participate in the debate, spoke in opposition to the proposition. Other speakers opposing the resolution included Irish Senator David Norris, Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, and Leonard Doyle, the foreign editor of the Independent newspaper in Britain.

Speakers in support of the resolution included John Micklethwait, the United States editor of the London Economist, Richard Aldous, a historian and international relations specialist at University College in Dublin, and Paul MacDonald of the Open Republic Institution. Following the speeches, the debate audience voted overwhelmingly to reject the resolution.

We reprint below the speech delivered by David North.

First of all, I would like to thank the Philosophical Society for inviting me to participate in this debate on the foreign policy of the United States. I welcome this opportunity to speak on behalf of those many millions of Americans who are irreconcilably opposed to the occupation of Iraq, loathe the Bush administration and everything it stands for, and are deeply ashamed of what has been done and is being done by the US government in the name of the American people.

An unbridgeable moral chasm divides the political establishment, intoxicated with delusions of imperialist grandeur, from the millions of working class people who hate war, want no part of an American empire, do not want to kill or conquer anyone, have no financial interests in the oil fields of the Middle East and Central Asia, and believe in their hearts the words of Lincoln—that it is right that makes might, and not the other way round.

The proposition before this House, "That the United States is still the world's peacekeeper," turns international political reality on its head. To call the United States a "peacekeeper" is akin to describing an undertaker as an "after-life enhancement specialist."

American imperialism, in pursuit of global hegemony, is the principal instigator of violence, exploitation and inhumanity in the world today. Its foreign policy has assumed the character of a vast international criminal exercise. While proclaiming a war against terrorism, the United States has become the only nation in the world whose head of state has publicly and officially embraced terrorism as the foundation of the strategic doctrine of his government. This is the essential significance of President Bush's proclamation in September 2002 of the doctrine of "pre-emptive war."

The word "terrorism" has a complex historical pedigree and, over time, has acquired many different political usages. But if we are to employ this term in its broadest and most general modern sense—as the premeditated and illegal use of violence (or the threat to use violence) against other states and their people in order to achieve certain strategic political and economic aims; as the deliberate infliction of terrible injury and death calculated to intimidate, frighten and coerce other states and their civilian populations into submitting to the demands of the perpetrator of terror—then the supreme and most dreadful form of terrorism is war itself.

From this standpoint, the doctrine of pre-emptive war, and its initial implementation in the form of the invasion and subjugation of Iraq, represent a dangerous historical regression—away from principles of international law established in response to the blood-soaked events of the first half of the twentieth century, towards a revival of the sort of imperialistic criminality once practiced by the Nazi Reich.

In the nineteenth century, von Clausewitz's dictum that war was, in essence, politics conducted by other means guided the diplomacy and military policies of the great powers. But in the aftermath of World War I, the transformation of Europe into a slaughterhouse could not be described as simply another form of politics. The concept of war guilt emerged: that governments could be held responsible and accountable for waging aggressive war. The resort to war in pursuit of strategic geo-political and economic objectives—that is, for reasons other than self-defense defined in the strictest sense of the term—began to be seen in international law as a crime that could not be justified on the basis of traditional and conventional "reasons of state."

The next major step toward the criminalization of aggressive war was the famous treaty for the Renunciation of War, negotiated by the American secretary of state, Frank Kellogg, in 1928. The Kellogg-Briand Pact did not explicitly make its violation a punishable offense, a weakness that the Allied Powers were determined to correct at the conclusion of World War II. Article 6(a) of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal, upon which the Nuremberg prosecution of Nazi leaders was based, defined as "crimes against peace" the "planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression, or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances, or participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the foregoing."

The International Tribunal declared, moreover, that "War is essentially an evil thing. Its consequences are not confined to the belligerent states alone, but affect the whole world. To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime differing from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole."

In 1945-46, the United States was the most emphatic advocate of the proposition that the waging of aggressive war constituted a crime. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, who headed the American prosecution staff, stated that the legal principles underlying the Nuremberg prosecutions were universally valid. He insisted that “if certain acts in violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others that we would not be willing to have invoked against us.”

Much has changed since those words were uttered. The promulgation of the doctrine of pre-emptive war in September 2002 and its implementation in March 2003 with the launching of an aggressive war against Iraq represents nothing less than the unequivocal repudiation by the United States of the legal principles that were enforced against the Nazi ringleaders at Nuremberg and, therefore, the criminalization, in the full and most profound legal sense of the word, of American foreign policy.

The National Security Strategy proclaimed by the Bush administration on September 17, 2002 asserts the right of the United States to take unilateral military action against another country without offering credible evidence that it is acting in self-defense, as defined by international law. This assertion of all-encompassing powers to resort to violence whenever the US decides to do so is justified with loosely constructed language that cannot withstand even a cursory analysis: “We must be prepared to stop *rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction* against the United States and our allies and friends.”

Who defines what a “rogue state” is? Is it any state that challenges, directly or indirectly, American interests? The assertion of the right to take military action against “rogue states” *before* they are able to threaten or use WMD can only mean that the United States claims the right to attack whatever state it identifies as a potential threat. A definition of “threat” that requires no overt action against the United States, but merely the potential to pose a danger at some point in the future, would place virtually every country in the world on the list of possible targets for an attack. As a matter of fact, the document speaks not only of “enemies,” but also of “potential adversaries.” A potential adversary is any country that might at some point pose a challenge, or be seen in some way as an obstacle, to the global hegemony of the United States. How many countries meet the very general criteria used by the United States government to identify “potential adversaries?” Well, how many countries are there in the world?

Countries that might suddenly find themselves targeted for attack in the name of the “war against terror” are by no means limited to the “usual suspects” in the Middle East and Central Asia. A new book, that has been praised by a former close aide to President Bush, makes the following lurid accusation: “The cold truth is that, since the early 1980s, Canada has become a source country of international terrorism ... Canada has provided a haven, money, propaganda, weapons and foot soldiers to the globe’s deadliest religious, ethnic and political extremist movements... turning this country into a base for international terror.” And you probably thought the film *Canadian Bacon* was merely a spoof!

The claims of self-defense asserted by the United States government when it attacked Iraq lacked any semblance of credibility, let alone legality. They were as bogus as those invoked by the Nazis when the Wehrmacht crossed into Poland on September 1, 1939.

We all know today that all the claims made by the United States

about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction were lies. But it must be pointed out that even had Iraq possessed such weapons, that would not in and of itself have justified, under international law, the invasion of Iraq.

The consequences of this war have been horrifying. Cities and villages are being bombed and strafed on almost a daily basis by US warplanes and helicopters. More than 30,000 Iraqis and 1,000 American soldiers have been killed since the invasion began. No one knows how many tens of thousands more Iraqis have been injured and maimed. The Bush administration and the Pentagon do not bother to keep count.

Inevitably, the criminal decision to go to war against Iraq has led to further crimes, such as the brutalization of Iraqi citizens at Abu Ghraib prison. Under international law, the authors of the Iraq war are fully culpable for the sick, sadistic and perverted abuse of Iraqi citizens.

There is another critical aspect of international law, arising out of Nuremberg, that is highly relevant in judging the legal culpability of the American decision makers responsible for the war against Iraq. A crime against peace is a criminal act. But the crime is not completed unless it is accompanied by criminal consciousness. It must be established that there was an intent to undertake an aggressive war.

When legal proceedings on the Iraq war are finally held—and that day will come—it will be possible to demonstrate that the war in Iraq was planned and implemented by high officials in the American state for the purpose of achieving long-term geo-strategic political, economic, and military objectives entirely unrelated to the bogus self-defense arguments that were later concocted to provide some legal cover, however threadbare. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, among others, has left behind a long paper trail in which his decade-long and fervent advocacy of force as a means of guaranteeing the strategic dominance of the United States is irrefutably established.

As for Iraq, on January 26, 1998, Mr. Wolfowitz and his colleagues from the now-infamous Project for a New American Century wrote a letter to President Clinton advocating the use of military force to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

President Bush, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz may argue, using that rather shop-worn phrase, that “9/11 changed everything,” that new conditions justify the resort to war, etc. Such claims, as Justice Jackson explained so well 58 years ago, should be directed to historians, who take great interest in questions of political and strategic motivation. But they have no standing in international law, which holds that planning and launching an aggressive war is illegal.

I urge this House to reject the resolution. The vote you will take is freighted with immense political and moral significance. Whether justified in the name of “Lebensraum” or the flimflam of “national security,” humanity must not tolerate the reversion to imperialist barbarism of which the invasion of Iraq by the United States is a terrible omen.



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