US intervenes in disputed Ukraine election: Who the hell asked you, Mr. Powell?

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If it were not for its reactionary political implications, US Secretary of State Colin Powell's declaration last week that the Ukraine presidential election is unacceptable because it does not meet the high standards of the Bush administration would be a moment of high comedy. Here is the American secretary of state, the chief international spokesman of an administration that first came to power after a stolen election, declaring the Ukrainian election to be illegitimate "because it does not meet international standards and because there has not been an investigation of the numerous and credible reports of fraud and abuse."

One can only imagine the response within US ruling circles had Russia or China or the European Union declared in December 2000 that the Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* was a flagrant violation of democratic rights, and as such the awarding of the White House to George W. Bush did not meet "international standards" and was "completely unacceptable." Secretary Powell owes his elevated status as the principal diplomatic representative of US imperialism to that piece of flagrant electoral manipulation.

Documented fraud and abuse perpetrated in the 2000 elections included: the organized intimidation of working class voters in the state of Florida, the intervention by the Republican Party to halt the legal recounting of ballots, the organization of thugs by the Republican Party to intimidate local election boards and the final decision by a partisan 5-4 Supreme Court vote to hand the election to George W. Bush even though he lost the popular vote. The fraud and intimidation carried out in Florida was presided over by the Republican candidate's brother, Governor Jeb Bush, and his state campaign coordinator, Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris.

While perhaps not sinking to the level of the 2000 elections, there is substantial evidence of manipulations in the 2004 elections. One of the principal pieces of evidence used by the Bush administration to back its claims of fraud in the Ukrainian elections is the disparity between the official results, which gave the victory to current Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, and exit polls, which suggest that the American and EU-backed candidate Victor Yushchenko won by a substantial margin. And yet the very same disparity occurred in the 2004 American elections! While Bush won according to the official tally, exit polls in several major states that went to Bush put Democratic candidate John Kerry ahead by a substantial margin.

This does not even address the way in which elections are manipulated in the US at a much more systemic level: the enormous inflows of corporate cash, the manipulation of public opinion through the mass media, the systematic exclusion of oppositional parties and viewpoints, and the anti-democratic character of the Electoral College. All of these combine to ensure that the only possible contenders in an American election are those chosen by the giant corporations and banks.

The pretense of the Bush administration to stand for democracy in Ukraine is even more hypocritical when considered in the light of the US record throughout the 20th century. Decade after decade, and especially from the time the Cold War began in 1947, the United States has worked assiduously to promote the interests of American corporations and banks at the expense of the democratic aspirations of people around the world.

The US-backed assassination of democratically elected Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1973 is only the most notorious in a litany of CIA operations to overthrow elected governments in Iran, Guatemala, Greece, Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic and Panama, among others. The US government supported flagrantly antidemocratic regimes in most of Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. No right-wing dictatorship was too brutal or bloodthirsty to receive American support—not Franco's Spain, not apartheid South Africa, not the medieval tyranny of Saudi Arabia.

Now Bush's "war on terror" provides a new pretext for enlisting despots and dictators among America's allies. This includes such longtime "friends" as Egypt's Mubarak, and new recruits like General Musharraf of Pakistan and the ex-Stalinist dictator Karimov of Uzbekistan. Last year the Bush administration blessed the dynastic succession of power in oil-rich Azerbaijan, where the former Stalinist leader Haider Aliyev handed over the presidency to his son in a crudely rigged election. Most recently, the elections in Afghanistan, praised in the American press as a great democratic victory for the US-backed Hamid Karzai, were widely recognized as coerced, carried out at gunpoint under the watchful eye of the American military.

As for the upcoming elections in Iraq, the US government is not willing to content itself with fraud and abuse—it is employing the time-tested measures of political extermination, fertilizing the soil of the January elections with the blood of masses of Iraqi resistance fighters. Just last week, two leading opponents of the stooge regime of Iyad Allawi were assassinated in the northern city of Mosul. An estimated 100,000 Iraqis have been killed since the invasion last year, and thousands more in the complete

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annihilation of the city of Fallujah last month.

Powell himself has become notorious for his role in promoting the invasion of Iraq. The denunciation of electoral "fraud and abuse" is made by an individual who managed during his tenure as secretary of state to completely disabuse anyone who had illusions in his personal integrity. He lied openly and brazenly, before hundreds of millions of people, in his prewar declaration to the UN Security Council on Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

It is not necessary to argue that the Ukrainian election was a model of democratic procedures, or to support the Russian-backed candidate Yanukovich, to recognize the hypocrisy of the American position. One can say with a high degree of certainty that there was a significant amount of fraud involved in the Ukraine voting—and that it likely took place on both sides. There is no doubt that Russian president Vladimir Putin exerted a great deal of influence in ensuring that Yanukovich was declared the winner—just as the US and European Union did in funneling financial aid and political backing to Yushchenko.

However, the conflict over Ukraine between Russia on the one hand and the US and Europe on the other has nothing to do with democracy vs. authoritarianism. What is involved is a conflict of interests, centered on the country's importance as an agricultural and industrial region, its crucial position in an important gas transit system, and its general geostrategic location as a border country to Russia, Eastern Europe and the Black Sea.

American interest in the region is a part of the same global strategy expressed in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The collapse of the Soviet Union has been met with the determination of the American ruling elite to expand its influence, not only in the oil-rich Middle East, but in the areas of the former Soviet Union that have long been tacitly consigned to Russia's own sphere of influence: Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia.

While American officials and the media have denounced in strident terms Russian "neo-imperialism" in Eastern Europe, nothing is said of the intervention of the United States in the same region. Following the war in Afghanistan, the US has installed permanent military bases in many of the Central Asian states once part of the Soviet Union. Last year, the US instigated the so-called "Rose Revolution" in Georgia which brought to power the American-backed government of Mikhail Saakashvili. Since then, Saakashvili has carried out a right-wing economic policy that has produced devastating consequences for broad sections of the population. No doubt these same policies would be pursued in Ukraine under Yushchenko, as the country is opened up to Western corporations and capital.

The *WSWS* urges its readers to carry out a simple exercise. Go to Google and search for the phrase "US-Ukraine relations." For added interest, one might add the term "oil" or "gas." Links will appear to a flood of documents on the extensive interest that the US has taken in Ukraine in recent years. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor under President Jimmy Carter, has taken a particular interest in Ukraine, visiting the country in May of this year. He advocated closer ties between the US and Ukraine, at the expense of Russia.

Brzezinski's visit was in line with words written in his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*. He noted then that Ukraine was one of five crucial "pivots" in the Eurasian region, control of which he considered critical to control of the world. He noted in particular the importance of an independent and pro-western Ukraine in undermining the power of Russia: "Without Ukraine," he wrote, "Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire."

Brzezinski's visit followed closely on the heels of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who met with opposition leader Yushchenko. Armitage held a press conference in which he discussed Ukraine's integration with NATO and the World Trade Organization. Armitage has since been in the forefront of those raising questions about the legitimacy of the presidential election.

Armitage's boss Colin Powell has announced that the US will not recognize the results of the Ukrainian elections. By what right does the American government in general and the Bush administration in particular—justifiably despised by the vast majority of the world's population for its arrogance and brutality—reserve to itself the power to recognize or not recognize elections in Ukraine or anywhere else?

Combined with arrogance there is, as in Iraq, sheer recklessness involved in the US policy in Ukraine. By encouraging an intransigent position on the part of the Yushchenko camp—and outraging the legitimate social and political concerns of the largely Russian-speaking working class of the Donbas and eastern Ukraine—the Bush administration increases the danger of a bloody civil war or partition of the country along ethno-linguistic lines. This would be a monumental tragedy on the model of the former Yugoslavia, but in a country twice as large, on the borders of Russia, and with access to much of the arsenal of the former Soviet Union.

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