

The Iraq war and the eruption of American imperialism

Part One

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13 April 2006

The following is the first part of a speech delivered by Nick Beams to public meetings in Sydney on April 4 and Melbourne on April 11 to mark three years since the US-led invasion of Iraq. Beams is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The second part will be published tomorrow.

In the field of politics, there are events which mark a fundamental turning point in the historical process. There is no doubt that the invasion and occupation of Iraq, which began three years ago, was one of these.

In September 2002, with the decision to invade Iraq having already been made, the Bush administration published its National Security Strategy (NSS). This document set out clearly and unambiguously that the United States was now reserving to itself the right to use military force pre-emptively in pursuit of its national interests and objectives on a global scale.

“The US national security strategy,” the document declared, “will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.”

Or as the well-known conservative writer, the *Atlantic Monthly* correspondent Robert Kaplan, was to put the issue somewhat more bluntly: “Our prize for winning the Cold War is not merely the opportunity to expand NATO, or to hold democratic elections in places that never had them, but something much broader: *We and nobody else will write the terms for international society*” (*Warrior Politics*, New York 2002, pp. 144-145, emphasis in original).

The doctrines set out in the 2002 NSS articulated what was a clear policy shift on the part of the US administration. Of course, the United States, as the world’s dominant imperialist power, had previously pursued its interests and objectives ruthlessly and employed military force where it considered that necessary. The long history of wars, military interventions, assassinations and coups in the post-World War II period are adequate testimony to that.

But it had always adhered, at least in theory, to the doctrine that military force should not be employed pre-emptively in pursuit of policy objectives. That had been the basis of the charges brought against the representatives of the Nazi regime at the Nuremberg war crimes trials—that they had pursued aggressive war as an instrument of policy.

In his summing up, the chief US prosecutor at those trials, Robert Jackson, declared: “We charge unlawful aggression but we are not trying the motives, hopes, or frustrations which may have led Germany to resort to aggressive war as an instrument of policy. The law, unlike politics, does not concern itself with the good or evil in the status quo, nor with the merits of the grievances against it. It merely requires that the status quo be not attacked by violent means and that policies be not advanced by war. We may admit that overlapping ethnological and cultural groups,

economic barriers, and conflicting national ambitions created in the 1930s, as they will continue to create, grave problems for Germany as well as for the other peoples of Europe. We may admit too that the world had failed to provide political or legal remedies which would be honorable and acceptable alternatives to war. We do not underwrite either the ethics or the wisdom of any country, including my own, in the face of these problems. But we do say that it is now, as it was for sometime prior to 1939, illegal and criminal for Germany or any other nation to redress grievances or seek expansion by resort to aggressive war.”

Pursuing aggressive war—it was from this that all the other crimes of the Hitler regime flowed.

In a famous speech delivered in October 1937, President Roosevelt had noted that the hopes of international peace had given way to a “haunting fear of calamity” as a result of “the present reign of terror and international lawlessness.” This new era had begun, he continued, “through unjustified interference in the internal affairs of other nations or the invasion of alien territory in violation of treaties. It has now reached the stage where the very foundations of civilisation are seriously threatened. The landmarks, the traditions which have marked the progress of civilisation toward a condition of law and order and justice are being wiped away.” There was, he concluded, a “spreading epidemic of world lawlessness.”

Those remarks were directed above all against Nazi Germany. Today, they apply with no less force to the United States itself, which is at the centre of international lawlessness.

This eruption of militarism is being justified on the grounds that September 11, 2001 “changed everything” and that the United States, with its allies, is now engaged in a global war against terrorism, for the values of civilisation itself, according to Bush’s chief propagandist, Tony Blair.

But what exactly changed? Here, the NSS document of 2002 is quite explicit. “The events of September 11, 2001, fundamentally changed the context for relations between the United States and the other main centres of global power, and opened vast, new opportunities.” What were those opportunities? The document went on to explain. “It is time,” it continued, “to reaffirm the essential role of American military strength.”

The terror attacks of September 11, 2001 have played a transformative role, but not in the way claimed by Bush, Blair and the other imperialist politicians. The war on terror has provided the pretext for the assertion by the United States of the right to deploy military force to realise its national objectives throughout the world—that is, to pursue the very same course for which the Nazi leaders were charged as war criminals.

Consider the recent remarks by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on the justification for the invasion of Iraq. In the lead-up to the war, Rice issued dire warnings about weapons of mass destruction. America could

not wait for proof of their existence, she said, in case the “smoking gun” came in the form of a “mushroom cloud”.

With the exposure of the WMD lies, a new set of justifications is now advanced. On March 31, speaking to a group of foreign policy experts during her recent visit to Britain, Rice explained: “You were not going to have a different Middle East with Saddam Hussein at the centre of it.”

This followed remarks made in an interview on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on March 26. “If you really believe that the only thing that happened on 9/11 was people flew airplanes into buildings, I think you have a very narrow view of what we faced on 9/11,” Rice said. “We faced the outcome of an ideology of hatred throughout the Middle East that had to be dealt with. Saddam Hussein was a part of that old Middle East. The new Iraq will be a part of the new Middle East, and we will all be safer.”

In other words, the US was not satisfied with the existing political order and set out to change it by military force. But this is precisely the crime for which the Nazis were found guilty. In the words of the American prosecutor: “Our position is that whatever grievances a nation may have, however objectionable it finds the status quo, aggressive warfare is an illegal means for settling those grievances or altering those conditions.”

Lest anyone is under the mistaken belief that the 2002 NSS document was drawn up simply in preparation for the invasion of Iraq and did not reflect Washington’s long-term strategic objectives, allow me to refer to the 2005 NSS document released just a few weeks ago.

Bush’s introductory remarks to the new document underscore the yawning and ever-widening gap that exists between the utterances of imperialist politicians and reality.

He explained that a “new democratic government” has arisen in Afghanistan. Last month, however, the United Nations said the situation was so bad in that country that it urged refugees not to return. The regime is so democratic that a covert from Islam to Christianity was threatened with the death penalty.

In the wake of signing a nuclear deal with India, which has refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and which has tested nuclear weapons, Bush declared: “We have focused the attention of the world on the proliferation of dangerous weapons.”

“We have stood for the spread of democracy in the broader Middle East,” Bush proclaimed, except that this does not extend to recognising the democratic election of Hamas to the leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

And in conclusion, Bush said: “We are fighting alongside Iraqis to secure a united, stable, and democratic Iraq—a new ally in the war on terror in the heart of the Middle East”. The falsity of that claim is established in the daily carnage that is Iraq.

As for the updated NSS document itself, it not only reaffirms the doctrine of pre-emption, but makes clear that it has far wider application than just Iraq. The document declares that the US does not “rule out the use of force before attacks occur, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack.” In other words, no hard evidence is needed. There must simply be the belief in the administration that an attack is being prepared somewhere and at some time.

At the time of the last NSS, Iraq was the target. Now military action is being prepared against Iran. The document states that the US “may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran” and goes on to repeat its assertion that Iran is concealing the development of nuclear weapons. It then goes on to state, however, that as important as the nuclear issues are, the US has “broader concerns”.

Then follow the usual objections. Iran sponsors terror, threatens Israel, disrupts democracy in Iraq and denies the aspirations of its people for freedom. “The nuclear issue and our other concerns can ultimately be resolved only if the Iranian regime makes the strategic decision to change these policies, open up its political system, and afford freedom to its people. This is the ultimate goal of US policy,” it states.

In other words, the nuclear issue is a pretext. The real goal of US policy toward Iran is regime change—the installation of a puppet regime, which will follow US dictates and restore the situation that existed up to 1979 when the Shah was overthrown.

The NSS document makes clear that the strategic goal of the United States is the rearrangement of the world in accordance with its interests. In Latin America, the people must reject the “deceptive anti-free market populism” most closely associated with Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Russia has “great influence not only in Europe and its own immediate neighborhood, but also in many other regions of vital interest: the broader Middle East, South and Central Asia, and East Asia.” It must be encouraged to “respect the values of freedom and democracy at home and not to impede the cause of freedom and democracy in those regions”. That is, Russia must toe the line dictated by the United States.

One of the most significant features of the document is the way that it links economic and military issues, especially with regard to China. The United States, the NSS asserts, will encourage China down the “road of reform and openness”. But it then adds the following warning: “Chinese leaders must realise, however, that they cannot stay on this peaceful path while holding on to old ways of thinking and acting that exacerbate concerns throughout the region and the world.”

What are these “old ways”? They include, as could be expected, expanding China’s military “in a non-transparent way”—presumably the Chinese are supposed to lay before the United States the details of the military activities. But there are also some new concerns, including:

“Expanding trade, but acting as if they can somehow ‘lock up’ energy supplies around the world or seek to direct markets rather than opening them up—as if they can follow a mercantilism borrowed from a discredited era; and

“Supporting resource-rich countries without regard to their misrule at home or misbehaviour abroad of those regimes.”

In other words, Chinese energy companies must not buy up other firms or undertake mergers where such activities might conflict with the activities of US multinationals. And Beijing must not seek to develop alliances with resource rich countries, such as Iran, where this would conflict with the geo-political interests of the United States.

The positions outlined in the NSS on China have a deep historical resonance. At the end of the nineteenth century, the balance of power in Europe, which had obtained since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, was disrupted by the rise of a new economic power, the newly-unified state of Germany. The once backward region of Germany had become the economic powerhouse of the continent. But as history was to demonstrate, at the cost of millions of lives and the unleashing of unspeakable barbarism in the form of World War I, the older capitalist powers were not able to accommodate their new rival.

In the recent period, the question has been raised with ever greater frequency: will the existing great powers, and the United States in particular, be able to accommodate the rise of China or will its economic expansion lead to military conflict?

The NSS document makes clear that as far as the US is concerned the economic and military questions are bound together. The economic growth of China and the expansion of its influence can only be tolerated provided it does not conflict with the interests of the United States.

And how are those interests to be enforced? Under the heading “The Need for Action”, the NSS document makes this clear.

“The new strategic environment requires new approaches to deterrence and defence. ... Both offenses and defences are necessary to deter state and non-state actors, through denial of the objectives of their attacks and, if necessary, responding with overwhelming force. Safe, credible, and reliable nuclear forces continue to play a critical role. We are strengthening deterrence by developing a New Triad composed of offensive strike systems, both nuclear and improved conventional

capabilities; active and passive defences, including missile defences; and a responsive infrastructure, all bound together by enhanced command and control, planning and intelligence systems.”

To be continued



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