

SEP public meeting in Wellington

# Causes and consequences of the “war on terror”

## Part 3

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*On September 28, the World Socialist Web Site held a public meeting in Wellington, New Zealand entitled “Five years since September 11: Causes and consequences of the ‘war on terror’” (see “WSWS holds public meeting in Wellington, New Zealand”). The meeting was addressed by Nick Beams, Socialist Equality Party (Australia) national secretary, and John Braddock, New Zealand correspondent for the WSWS (see “The New Zealand Labour government and the ‘war on terror’”).*

*The following is the conclusion of Beams’s address to the meeting. Part one was published on October 4 and part two on October 5.*

The overriding consideration in determining US policy towards Iraq at the conclusion of the first Gulf War was the need to maintain American supremacy. Having conducted a kind of shakedown of its allies to pay for the war—Japan, the biggest contributor, paid out around \$13 billion—the US was determined to stop its rivals from gaining a foothold in post-war Iraq and beginning the exploitation of the country’s vast oil resources. This was the motivation behind the sanctions regime. It was not aimed at preventing the Saddam Hussein regime from re-arming, but at ensuring that Iraq and its oil reserves were kept off limits to US rivals.

By the end of the 1990s, the sanctions regime was becoming increasingly untenable as the European powers sought to circumvent it. Washington had to develop a new policy. In 1998, under the Clinton administration, Congress adopted a policy of “regime change” in Iraq.

From the very first day that it took office, the Bush administration, as the former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill has explained, had the invasion of Iraq high on its foreign policy agenda. When the attack on the World Trade Centre took place, Bush demanded that “evidence” be gathered to implicate Iraq, even though that country had nothing to do with the attack. In October 2002, following the war on Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban government, the Bush regime unveiled its National Security Strategy document, based on the new doctrine of “preventive war.” The significance of this document lay in the fact that it overturned all the precepts which had governed international law since World War II.

In the Nuremberg war crimes trials the basic precept established by the prosecution, led by American judge Robert Jackson, was that the guilt of the Nazis lay in waging a war of aggression. It was from this that all the other crimes flowed. In the NSS document of 2002 this principle was overturned: the Bush administration declared that it had the right to wage war against any nation it considered was a potential threat to the security of the United States. The war against Iraq rapidly followed and now, some three and a half years on, war is being actively prepared against Iran.

What is the source of this eruption of militarism? It would be a grave mistake to put it down to the personnel and ideology of the Bush

administration and its advisers among the so-called neo-cons. While the Democrats make criticisms of the Bush administration and various bourgeois think tanks make calls for a return to a foreign policy based on realism, there is no disagreement with the fundamental perspective of securing American global hegemony. The only differences are on how to achieve it. On the question of Iran, for example, the criticism of the Democrats comes from the right; that the actions of the Bush administration in Iraq have strengthened Tehran.

We need to look beyond immediate political alignments to discover the objective roots of militarism.

One of the factors certain to play a central role in military conflicts in the future is the struggle to acquire resources, especially oil.

Earlier this month, the *Financial Times* published a comment by Michael Meacher, the former environment minister in the Blair Labour government, under the title “Urgent action is needed to avert the looming oil wars.” He pointed to a desperate struggle among the major powers in which each is trying to grab the lion’s share of diminishing supplies of oil and gas. According to Meacher, on present estimates there will be a 50 percent increase in the demand for oil over the next 20 years, but neither the refining capacity nor spare production to fulfil it. The situation in natural gas is no better.

“This is a turning point in history,” he wrote. “Never before has a resource as fundamental as oil faced rapid decline without a substitute in sight. The self-destructive strategy of cornering diminishing oil and gas supplies must urgently be switched to building a new world energy order based on renewables and hydrogen economy, alongside energy conservation. If it is not, we risk a second Great Depression, rising military tensions and the prospect of big wars.”

Looking at Meacher’s list of prescriptions, one might say that if the capitalist system were to act at variance with the laws that have governed its whole historical existence then depression, militarism and war can be averted. We should not rate the chances of this taking place very highly.

In any case, the conflicts over oil and other resources are only one manifestation of deep-rooted structural conflicts. When World War I exploded in 1914, Leon Trotsky explained that it represented, in the most profound sense, the breakdown of the entire capitalist order. The war arose from the contradiction between the global development of the productive forces and the division of the world into rival, conflicting nation states and signified that the productive forces, which had been taken forward on the foundation of capitalist property relations and the nation-state system, had now outgrown the framework within which they had hitherto developed. Each of the major capitalist powers attempted to resolve this contradiction by transforming itself from a great into a world

power, leading to military conflict.

“The future development of world economy on the capitalistic basis,” he wrote, “means a ceaseless struggle for new and ever new fields of capitalist exploitation, which must be obtained from one and the same source, the earth. The economic rivalry under the banner of militarism is accompanied by robbery and destruction which violate the elementary principles of human economy. World production revolts not only against the confusion produced by national and state divisions but also against the capitalist economic organization, which has now turned into barbarous disorganization and chaos.”

The conflict between the great powers was not resolved by World War I. It continued, with even more horrific consequences, for another two and a half decades, finally coming to a conclusion in 1945 with the victory of US imperialism and its allies over its German and Japanese rivals. A relative equilibrium was established. But the fundamental contradictions that led to the two world wars and the horrors of depression and fascism were never overcome, only temporarily suppressed.

And now, the vast development of the productive forces over the past 60 years—in particular the global integration of production made possible by enormous advances in computer technology and communications in the recent period—has raised to a new peak of intensity the contradiction between world economy and the nation-state system. Herein lies the objective source of militarism.

As the leading capitalist power, the United States proposes to resolve this contradiction by establishing its global hegemony. But the relative position of the major powers has changed since the end of World War II. If the post-war boom went under the banner of Fordism—the extension of production methods, first developed in the US, to the rest of the world—then the change in the economic position of American capitalism is most graphically summed up in the crisis surrounding the Ford Motor Company, as it now destroys tens of thousands of jobs in a desperate bid to remain internationally competitive.

The US not only confronts old economic rivals—Japan, Germany and the other European powers—in a much-weakened economic position, it faces new challengers as well—China, Russia and, possibly further ahead, India. With its economic dominance a thing of the past, the US seeks to maintain its pre-eminent position in the one area where it still enjoys overwhelming supremacy—military power.

But militarism contains its own relentless logic as the experience of the invasion of Iraq so clearly demonstrates. Washington’s perspective was never to establish democracy but to plunder the country. This is the origin of the debacle in which it now finds itself. What is the way out? Only the further use of military force.

Back in the 1980s, Don Rumsfeld, who now issues stern warnings against the dangers of appeasement, undertook, on behalf of the Reagan administration, a special mission to re-establish relations with Saddam Hussein’s regime. The purpose was to provide a counterweight to Iran in the Middle East.

Today, with the overthrow of Hussein, Iran’s position has been strengthened and it seeks to assert itself as a regional power, directly against the interests of the United States. And so we find everyday that the drumbeat for war against Iran grows louder—a war that would have even more catastrophic consequences than the invasion of Iraq.

Not only is the Pentagon actively planning a military operation, it is seriously considering the use of nuclear weapons. Here again, a relentless logic is at work.

First of all, if the ostensible target of the attack is to be Iran’s nuclear facilities, then conventional bombing methods will not suffice. In the words of an Israeli consultant, Shlomo Mofaz, writing in the *Jerusalem Post* of September 19: “The Iranians have invested a lot of money to hide their weapons and infrastructure underground. The most sensitive items are below the surface. American experts have said they are not sure that

conventional weapons would be able to infiltrate these sites. Based on information from public sources, any attack should use tactical nuclear weapons.”

And the same logic applies to the use of troops. Consider the recent comment by right-wing columnist Walter Williams published in *Townhall.com*.

“Think about it,” he wrote. “Currently, the US has an arsenal of 18 Ohio class submarines. Just one submarine is loaded with 24 Trident nuclear missiles. Each Trident missile has eight nuclear warheads capable of being independently targeted. That means the US alone has the capacity to wipe out Iran, Syria or any other state that supports terrorist groups or engages in terrorism—without risking the life of a single soldier.”

Williams goes on to lament that Washington’s concern for “worldwide public opinion” and “weak will” is blocking the use of nuclear weapons against these countries because “any attempt to annihilate our Middle East enemies would create all sorts of handwringing about the innocent lives lost, so-called collateral damage.”

As the September 17 edition of *Time* magazine reports, a flurry of activity in the Middle East indicates that preparations for a war on Iran are being undertaken, with the Commander of the US Central Command, General John Abizaid, having placed Iran on the agenda in discussions with Persian Gulf commanders.

“On its face, of course, the notion of war with Iran seems absurd,” the author of the article notes. “By any rational measure, the last thing the US can afford is another war. Two unfinished wars—one on Iran’s eastern border, the other on its western flank—are daily depleting America’s treasury and overworked armed forces. Most of Washington’s allies in those adventures have made it clear they will not join another gamble overseas.”

This is a common response from those who try to reassure themselves that things cannot get worse. Logic, after all, dictates against it. Of course, the US “war on terror” is completely irrational—even from the standpoint of American imperialism’s own objectives. So somehow, another course will be followed. But there is a fundamental flaw in such arguments. They are based on the misconception that politics—and international politics in particular—proceeds according to the laws of reason, rather than from the conflict of opposed material interests, governed by completely different laws—the struggle for markets, profits and spheres of influence.

In other words, the irrationality of the US drive for global domination through the use of military means—the essence of the “war on terror”—does not arise from “The Madness of King George” but is rooted in the objective irrationality of the global capitalist system. The productive forces have been socialised to an unprecedented degree, leaping across national borders and boundaries, but the world remains divided and conflicted by the completely outmoded system of private ownership and rival nation-states. The US seeks to resolve this contradiction by establishing itself as the pre-eminent global power. But, at the same time, the very processes of global production have weakened its relative economic position. That is why it has to rely on military might.

Definite political perspectives flow from our analysis of the objective processes underlying the US war for global dominance. Above all, any conception that the struggle against militarism can be conceived as a campaign to pressure the imperialist powers to change course, or to vote other parties into government, is deeply flawed. If the struggle against imperialist war is to go forward, if it is to be more than a protest to the powers that be, it must be grounded on a socialist program aimed at the unification of the international working class, the overturn of the capitalist profit system and the establishment of a world socialist federation.

Furthermore, it would be a serious mistake to see the eruption of militarism, war and colonialism, or “regime change” as it is being designated in the twenty-first century, as simply emanating from the United States. The US only expresses in the most violent manner

objective tendencies lodged in the very structure of the global capitalist system.

Every part of the world has become an arena for conflicts among the major capitalist powers, with the lesser capitalist nations also striving to position themselves in the struggle for markets, profits and spheres of influence. The Asia-Pacific region is a case in point.

One of the central calculations behind the Australian government's fulsome support for the "war on terror" has been that it must secure US backing in order to advance the interests of Australian imperialism in the region. This alignment took place well before Bush came to office. In 1999, Australia was able to assume pre-eminence in East Timor, against its chief rival Portugal, largely because of the backing it received from the Clinton administration. And in the Australian intervention this year, support from the United States has again proved decisive.

The same issues lie behind Canberra's Solomon Islands intervention, where the Howard government is moving to bring about "regime change" in that impoverished country. It fears that the present government of Prime Minister Sogavare may lean towards other, rival, powers. As a comment in the *Australian Financial Review* recently noted, Australia could not pull out of the Solomons "without leaving a vacuum to be filled by a potential regional competitor" and Sogavare is well aware that "other powers—China, Malaysia, Taiwan—would be eager to expand their influence if Australia abandoned the Solomon Islands. Significantly, the New Zealand foreign minister, Winston Peters, has emphasised that the Clark government works "closely" with Australia and that "there is no gap between our desires in the Solomons or East Timor in terms of sound governance and future peace and security."

To conclude that New Zealand plays no role in the war drive of the major imperialist powers on the grounds that it only deploys limited forces and that often its interventions are confined to medical assistance would be the height of narrow-minded provincialism and parochialism.

Of course New Zealand does not play the determining role, or even a major one, but it plays a part nonetheless. A cog in a machine may not be the driving mechanism, but it is a vital component all the same.

All those who persist in such a short-sighted outlook or who believe, either out of naïveté or ignorance, that New Zealand can function as a kind of island of peace and tranquility in the middle of the Pacific Ocean can take a very practical history lesson. They should conduct a tour of the small towns across these islands and examine the plinths and monuments they will find there, recording the names—with surnames very often repeated several times—of those who lost their lives in the so-called Great War. And then they should remind themselves that the loss of life per head of population sustained in this small country was second to none.

Almost a century ago, the great forces of world history reached even these shores. Today history is once again on the move. Mankind made it through the twentieth century, although, it should be added, only just. Whether civilisation survives the twenty-first century, or whether there is a descent into barbarism—the beginnings of which we see unfolding—depends upon the outcome of decisive political struggles.

The urgent task is the revival and development of a broad socialist culture in the international working class and the construction of the world party of socialist revolution. This is the task to which the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International is dedicated. We urge you to give the most serious consideration to joining its ranks and playing your part in the future emancipation of mankind.

*Concluded*

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