

The historic decline of the United States and the eruption of militarism

Part one

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The following report was delivered by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, to a meeting of the SEP membership from January 25 to January 27. The remaining two parts will be published on February 13 and February 14.

A little over two months ago, in the mid-term Congressional elections of November 7, the American people delivered a massive repudiation of the war program of the Bush administration. In the face of a daily barrage of propaganda, half-truth, lies and falsifications, a media that functions as a virtual arm of the administration, vote-rigging, and the absence of opposition from any section of the political establishment, the result was a stunning rejection of the war in Iraq and, by implication, the “war on terror” that has formed the basis of the Bush regime for the past five years.

The 2006 vote had international significance. It demonstrated in the clearest possible way that, contrary to the picture that is so often presented, America is a deeply divided society. The Bush regime—and American imperialism and militarism—is hated around the world, but, as the election result made clear, nowhere more so than in the United States itself. This oppositional movement has profound implications for the working class in every country.

The election result was an expression, within the United States, of the international movement that erupted against the invasion of Iraq four years ago, in February 2003. One of the central tasks that the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and all its sections face is the development of the necessary theoretical, political and practical initiatives to revive and develop this movement, drawing on the experiences of the past four years and our historical analysis of the twentieth century.

If the elections of November 7 were an expression of the sentiments of the broad mass of the American people, then the announcement just two months later by Bush of his administration’s “new strategy” in Iraq demonstrated above all the completely hollowed-out and decayed character of American bourgeois democracy. In the face of an overwhelming rejection of the Iraq war, the Bush regime will not only step up its military operations in Iraq but has openly threatened a wider war against Iran and Syria, involving the whole of the Middle East—threats that were repeated in Bush’s State of the Union speech yesterday.

We will examine the content of the new strategy shortly. But first of all, it underscores a point of primary importance that we have always insisted upon: that the escalation and extension of the war will be accompanied by the destruction of what remains of democracy within the US itself.

In their media appearances following the announcement of the “new strategy”, both Bush and Cheney stressed that neither election results nor votes in Congress would stand in the way of their war drive. Bush told a

CBS interviewer on January 14: “I fully understand they [Congress] could try to stop me from doing it. But I’ve made my decision. And we’re going forward.”

Cheney was even more explicit. “The president is commander in chief. He’s the one who has to make these tough decisions.” “He’s the guy who’s got to decide how to use the force and where to deploy the force. And Congress obviously has to support the effort through the power of the purse. So, they’ve got a role to play, and we certainly recognize that. But you also cannot run a war by committee.”

Elaborated here is a perspective of executive dictatorship. President is not accountable to the legislature. Rather, the task of the president, as the commander in chief, is to override the will of the people in order to pursue military objectives that are decided by the executive.

As Cheney told his Fox interviewer, any conception that the executive is somehow responsible to the will of the people, as expressed through the legislature, must be overturned.

“That is part and parcel of the underlying fundamental strategy that our adversaries believe afflicts the United States. They are convinced that the current debate in Congress, that the election campaign last fall, all of that is evidence that they’re right when they say the United States doesn’t have the stomach for the fight in this long war on terror.

“They believe it. They look at the past evidence of it: in Lebanon in ’83, and Somalia in ’93, Vietnam before that. They’re convinced that the United States will, in fact, pack it in and go home if they just kill enough of us. They can’t beat us in a stand-up fight, but they think they can break our will. And if we have a president who looks at the polls and sees the polls are going south and concludes, ‘Oh, my goodness, we have to quit’, all that will do is validate the Al Qaeda view of the world. It’s exactly the wrong thing to do. This president does not make policy based on public opinion polls; he should not. It’s absolutely essential here that we get it right.”

Of course, the repudiation of the war was not simply expressed in an opinion poll, but in an election. Moreover there are deep-going concerns within the American ruling elite itself. By any measure, the global position of the United States—economically, politically and even militarily—has been significantly weakened. And this has caused considerable apprehension within ruling circles—reflected in the ISG report prepared by Baker and Hamilton. But Bush dismissed the report.

One has the sense that there is an inherent crisis in the very structure of the American state system. What happens if, in the event, say, of an invasion of Syria or Iran, opposition is voiced in the Congress and the legality of the administration’s action is challenged? Will the executive simply move in and shut the Congress down ... on the basis that it is aiding the enemy? That is the implication of Cheney’s argument.

If such action were taken, the Democrats would do all in their power to

prevent the development of mass opposition—just as they did in 2000, when they sanctioned the decision of the Supreme Court to award the election to Bush. But millions of ordinary people have made many experiences since then, and their reaction would be a far different matter.

The proposals for executive dictatorship go even further—into the judiciary. In a speech to the American Enterprise Institute—where Bush’s “surge” plan was conceived—Attorney General Alberto Gonzales maintained that judges should not rule on national security matters. “A judge will never be in the position to know what is in the national security interest of the country.” The judiciary should “show deference” to the executive branch when the issue of national security is involved. “How are judges supposed to gather up the information, the collective wisdom of the entire executive branch ... and make a determination as to what is in the national security interest of our country? They’re not capable of doing that.”

“I try to imagine myself being a judge. What do I know about what is going on in Afghanistan or Guantánamo?”

Gonzales’s argument is that no challenge should be made to the president’s war policies because he is the “commander in chief”. Any action taken by the executive against American citizens should not come under the purview of the judiciary if it concerns “national security.”

The outlook of the “opposition” Democrats

If Bush and Cheney feel they can openly repudiate the overwhelming public opposition to the war, it is because they have long ago taken the measure of the Democratic “opposition”. They are well aware that the Democrats have no intention of implementing measures in the Congress which could challenge them. The Democrats’ outlook was recently summed up in a scathing column by Jacob Weisberg, published in the *Financial Times* on January 12.

Entitled “Congress is helpless only out of choice” he wrote: “Several decades back, the psychologist Martin Seligman developed his theory of ‘learned helplessness’. Subjected to repeated punishment, animals and humans come to believe they have no control over what happens to them, whether they actually do or not. In Seligman’s original experiment, dogs given repeated electrical shocks would prostrate themselves and whine, even when escaping the abuse lay within their power.

“As with canines, so with congressional Democrats. In theory, they now control a co-equal branch of government. In practice, they are so traumatised by years of mistreatment at the hands of a contemptuous executive that they continue to cower and simper whenever master waves a stick in their direction.

“This phenomenon is at its most pitiable when it comes to Congress’s powers over national security, terrorism and the war in Iraq. Last Sunday, Senator Joseph Biden, the Democrats’ dean of foreign policy, was asked on *Meet the Press* what he intended to do when President George W. Bush announced his plan to send additional American troops to Iraq. ‘There’s not much I can do about it,’ Mr Biden shot back. ‘Not much anybody can do about it. He’s commander-in-chief.’”

The psychology of the Democrats described here reflects the collapse of the entire perspective of American liberalism—a process going back over decades.

Even more significant than psychology, the outlook of the Democrats flows from the agreement by all sections of the American political establishment that the most critical issue is the preservation, by whatever means necessary, of US global hegemony. Their differences with the Bush administration are not over this objective, but over the methods it is employing.

It is not that the Democrats have no differences with Bush. They do—as do many Republicans. But they have no coherent alternative to achieve their shared objective of maintaining American global dominance. This is understood by the Bush administration. Hence its continual retort against its critics: “What alternative do you have?”. The unstated premise is that both sides agree on the need to maintain the global position of the US.

Bush refers to the “war on terror” as the great ideological struggle of our time. It involves, he says, the very future of the United States itself. What is really at stake here? No one seriously believes that the terror bands of Al Qaeda, or groups of Islamic fanatics, can destroy the United States. In reality, far bigger forces are at work.

Some of them were indicated in a recent article by Jeffrey Herf, one of the so-called liberals in the Democratic Party. Herf is an American supporter of the “Euston Manifesto” group, a tendency originating in Britain that seeks to provide a justification for the invasion of Iraq on the basis of liberal principles.

According to Herf, in his article entitled *New Liberalism, Radical Islam and the War in Iraq*: “[T]he political future of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East remains a matter of vital national interest to the United States and of our allies in Europe, as well as to India, China” and moderate Arab countries. “This is the case because the world economy runs on oil. Stability in this region is thus of vital interest to countries around the globe. It is a vital interest of both the United States and all oil dependent nations that neither radical Islamists or secular radicals, neither Saddam’s Iraq in the past or Iran today, became hegemonic in this region. Preventing such domination is a vital, not a peripheral, interest of the United States.

“In both World War II and the Cold War, the United States asserted that its vital interests required preventing the hegemonic dominance of one power over all of Europe, and of Asia.”

Herf continues: “The formative experience of this country’s now politically dominant generation was the war in Vietnam. In contrast to the war in Iraq, that war was fought over a country that was peripheral, not vital, to American interests. ... The combination of oil, potential for weapons of mass destruction and the ideological goals of radical Islam mean that the stakes in Iraq are much higher than they were in Vietnam.”

A further revealing insight into the thinking of leaders of the Democratic Party was provided by a discussion on “The Way Forward in Iraq” organised by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on January 8, 2007. This was the discussion from which the *World Socialist Web Site’s* Barry Grey was excluded. It underscored the fact that objections to Bush are not based on opposition to the war in Iraq as such—a war for which the Democrats voted—but because it is going so badly, endangering the long-term strategic position of the US.

The discussion involved presentations from four leading members of the House Armed Services Committee. The most revealing came from Jim Marshall, a Democrat from Georgia.

“We as a country, we as a government, we as a Congress, can continue focusing on small details, and at the same time miss some very big-picture items.... But if you sit back and take a look at the global threats that are facing us, they go so far beyond Iraq and Afghanistan that it’s easy for us to lose our sense of real place here. It’s not to suggest that the challenge of Iraq and Afghanistan are small things. They are not. But we’ve got global issues facing the world that are going to turn into national security threats for the United States that are rather stunning.

“Just think about the fact that America—5 percent of the population of the United States controls, what 25 or 40 percent of the world’s wealth. Think about the fact that, what, maybe 5 billion people in the world live on \$2 a day; climate change; economic integration, which is not very well coordinated and has no supervising authority governing it, none whatsoever; no real regional or international partnerships that are effective to deal with things like pandemics, rising military threats, global terrorist

networks.... And as we as a globe become more integrated, as the acts of just a few folks somewhere in a remote place in the globe can have an impact throughout the globe become more frequent and more significant, we've got to wonder about how we, as a civilization, a global civilization, organize ourselves to meet the challenges that are in front of us ... Those are big issues, and they face us in the immediate future.”

Preparations for war against Iran

The only way forward, so far as the Bush administration is concerned—and no one has put forward a viable counter-strategy—lies in widening the war in the Middle East. His State of the Union speech of January 10, where he outlined this position, was significant in two aspects.

Firstly, the change of policy in regard to the situation in Iraq—particularly in Baghdad—and secondly, the threats against Syria, and especially Iran. Indeed, it could be said that Iran, not Iraq, was the central focus of the speech.

Over the past weeks and months, a series of measures have pointed to US war preparations against Iran:

*A second carrier battle group has been stationed in the Persian Gulf and Patriot anti-missile units have been deployed in Iraq. Neither of these moves is related to Iraq's internal situation, but both are significant from the standpoint of military operations against Iran—just as is the appointment of a naval aviator, William Fallon, as commander in chief of Central Command, which oversees the Middle East.

*Last December several Iranian diplomats were arrested, followed by the arrest of six more in an office that has functioned as an Iranian consulate since 1992.

*In his speech, Bush declared that US forces would “interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria” and “seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.” As was widely noted, including in Congressional hearings, these initiatives bare striking resemblance to the illegal operations carried out by the US military in Cambodia during the Vietnam War.

*Following the speech, members of Bush's administration have made a series of pointed references to Iran. A typical comment was that of National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, who remarked on “Meet the Press” that the war in Iraq was part of “a broad struggle going on in the Middle East between the forces of freedom and democracy and the forces of terror and tyranny—and Iran is behind a lot of that.”

As far as the situation in Iraq is concerned, the major shift is that US forces will now move against the Mahdi army in Sadr city, with or without the go-ahead of the Maliki government.

From the very outset of the war, there has always been a contradiction in US policy in Iraq. On the one hand, Washington continued to pursue its goal of regime change in Iran—it has never recovered from the blow delivered by the overthrow of the Shah in 1979—while at the same time it cobbled together a government in Baghdad, which drew political and material support from Iran. How was this contradiction to be resolved? James Baker's ISG group advanced one possible solution: open up a dialogue and come to an agreement with Syria and Iran. But the Bush administration rejected this, not least because it would have meant a complete recasting of American policy in the Middle East and a change in the relationship of the US with Israel. The only other alternative was to proceed more aggressively with the program of “regime change” in Iran. But that option requires the crushing of the Shia militias in Baghdad, who would be likely to launch an offensive against American forces if Iran were attacked. The same logic was at work in Israel's war in Lebanon last year. One of the aims of that offensive was to destroy Hezbollah and

remove any threat against Israel from that quarter, should an attack be launched against Iran either by Israel or the United States itself.

The crisis of US and world capitalism

Increasingly, US policy assumes a form of madness in which every military intervention creates new problems and more enemies, which then have to be eliminated by increased military force. This madness, however, is not simply the product of the members of the Bush administration. It is lodged within the crisis confronting world capitalism as a whole, and the United States in particular.

In order to illustrate this point, let me refer to an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in September-October 2002 by the liberal international relations theorist, John Ikenberry. In the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, Ikenberry viewed with concern the Bush administration's new doctrine—the growth of an American imperial ambition that threatened to transform the world in a way that the end of the Cold War did not.

“America's nascent neoimperial grand strategy threatens to rend the fabric of the international community and political partnerships precisely at a time when that community and those partnerships are urgently needed. It is an approach fraught with peril and likely to fail. It is not only politically unsustainable but diplomatically harmful. And if history is any guide, it will trigger antagonism and resistance that will leave America in a more hostile and divided world.”

Ikenberry hailed the post World War II order, created by the efforts of the United States based on a realist foreign policy, in which the interests of other states were recognised and, to some extent, accommodated and a free market economic order established creating “the most stable and prosperous international system in world history.”

This was now being threatened by a neoimperialist policy which would prove to be unsustainable and, ultimately, damaging to American interests.

In concluding his article Ikenberry insisted that “the United States should reinvigorate its older strategies, those based on the view that America's security partnerships are not simply instrumental tools but critical components of an American-led world political order that should be preserved.”

Like Ikenberry, the more far-sighted liberals were able to point to the disastrous consequences of the Bush imperial policy. But none has been able to answer the fundamental question: why is it still being pursued? Four years on, any claim that it is simply because of the deranged thinking of Bush's foreign policy planners is untenable. The Bush policy must have deep social roots.

The ICFI and the WSWS have not only identified what these are, we have also emphasised their historical significance. The fundamental contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, which arise from the irreconcilable conflict between the forces of production and the social relations under which they have been developed, are once again coming to the surface, in the form of the conflict between the globally integrated world economy and the capitalist nation-state system.

The US ruling elite aims to resolve this conflict through the United States assuming a hegemonic role in the world capitalist system. But it does so under transformed conditions. The very processes of globalisation, which make ever more necessary the establishment of a global hegemon, have, at the same time, undermined the once overwhelming economic dominance that the US once enjoyed and which, in the final analysis, formed the basis of the “golden age” now looked back upon so fondly by Ikenberry and others who oppose the new course.

The central contradiction is this: right at the point where, because of the

globalisation of production, US capitalism finds it ever more necessary to assert its hegemony, it no longer has the economic power to do so.

Take GDP as an indicator. In 1951, America's share of the world economy was 27.8 percent. In 2001, it was 21.4 percent. This is less than the share of so-called developed Asia, excluding Japan, which comes in at 24.6 percent. Such aggregate figures, however, do not give a complete picture. American hegemony after the war was based on its mass industrial capacity. The US was home to about 60 percent of the world's manufacturing capacity. Today the United States has a trade and balance of payments deficit that requires about \$3 billion a day to finance it.

To be continued



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