

# After the slaughter: political lessons of the Balkan War

**David North**  
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*We are reposting here a statement by David North, chairman of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party. The statement was originally published on June 14, 1999. March 24 marked the 10th anniversary of the beginning of the 11-week US-NATO bombardment of Serbia and Kosovo.*

The capitulation of Serbia to the US-NATO onslaught brings to an end the last major strategic experience of the 20th century. Its bloody conclusion endows the century with a certain tragic symmetry. It began with the suppression of the anti-colonial uprising of the Chinese Boxers. The century closes with a war that completes the reduction of the Balkans to the status of a neo-colonial protectorate of the major imperialist powers.

It is too early to appreciate the full extent of the devastation wreaked upon Serbia and Kosovo by the missiles and bombs of the United States. The number of military deaths suffered by the Serbs is estimated at 5,000. Military casualties are thought to be twice that number. At least 1,500 civilians have been killed. In the course of nearly 35,000 sorties, the US Air Force—abetted by its European accomplices—shattered a vast portion of the industrial and social infrastructure of Yugoslavia. NATO estimates that 57 percent of the country's petroleum reserves have been damaged or destroyed. Nearly all the major highways, railways and bridges have been extensively bombed. The electrical transformers, central power plants and water filtration systems upon which modern urban centers depend are functioning at only a fraction of their pre-bombardment capacity. Several hundred thousand workers have lost their livelihoods because of the destruction of their factories and workplaces. Several major hospitals have suffered extensive bomb-related damages. Schools attended by a total of 100,000 children have been damaged or destroyed.

The estimated cost of rebuilding what NATO has demolished is between \$50 billion and \$150 billion. Even the lower figure is far beyond the resources available to Yugoslavia. It is expected that the country's gross national product will decline by 30 percent this year. During the last two months consumer spending fell by nearly two-thirds. Economic researchers have already calculated that, without outside assistance, Yugoslavia would require 45 years to reach even the meager level of economic prosperity that it knew in 1989!

The bombing of Yugoslavia has exposed the real relations that exist between imperialism and small nations. The great indictments of imperialism written in the first years of the 20th century—those of Hobson, Lenin, Luxemburg and Hilferding—read like contemporary documents. Economically, small nations are at the mercy of the lending agencies and financial institutions of the major imperialist powers. In the realm of politics, any attempt to assert their independent interests brings with it the threat of devastating military retaliation. With increasing frequency small states are being stripped of their national sovereignty, compelled to accept foreign military occupation and submit to forms of rule that are, when all is said and done, of an essentially colonialist character. The dismantling of the old colonial empires during the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s appears more and more, in the light of contemporary events, to have been only a

temporary episode in the history of imperialism.

The assault on Yugoslavia can be defined more appropriately as a massacre than a war. A war implies combat, in which both sides are exposed to at least some significant degree of risk. Never in history has there been a military conflict in which so great an imbalance existed between the contending forces. Even Hitler's bloody and one-sided attacks on Poland, Holland and Norway exposed German forces to a measurable level of danger. That element of military risk was for the United States entirely missing in the latest war. Without losing a single life to so much as a stray bullet, NATO pilots and the operators of its computerized missile launch systems laid waste to much of Yugoslavia.

This imbalance in the military resources available to the opposing sides is a defining characteristic of this war. At the end of the 20th century, the economic resources commanded by the imperialist powers guarantee their technological supremacy which, in turn, is translated into overwhelming military advantage. Within this international framework, the United States has emerged as the principal oppressor imperialist nation, utilizing its technological dominance in the sphere of precision-guided munitions to bully, terrorize and, if it so chooses, lay waste to virtually defenseless small and less-developed countries that have, for one or another reason, gotten in its way.

From a military standpoint, the bombing campaign has again demonstrated the lethal capacities of the United States' war-making machine. Its defense contractors are congratulating themselves and smacking their lips in anticipation of the revenue stream that will flow from purchase orders as the Pentagon replenishes its arsenal of weapons. But the capitulation of Serbia is a Pyrrhic victory. The United States has secured its short-term objectives in the Balkans, but at tremendous long-term political costs. Despite the bombastic propaganda campaign to portray its destruction of Yugoslavia as a humanitarian exercise, the international image of the United States has suffered irreparable damage. In the atmosphere of political confusion surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union, the prestige of the United States rose to heights not seen since its glory years of World War II. Illusions abounded in America's 'democratic' and 'humanitarian' role.

Much has changed in the course of this decade. The endless series of cruise missile attacks against one or another defenseless enemy has provoked a sense of revulsion among the broad masses. All over the world the United States is perceived as a ruthless and dangerous bully that will stop at nothing to secure its interests. The rage which erupted in the streets of Beijing after the bombing of the Chinese embassy was not merely the product of the Stalinist regime's propaganda and incitement of chauvinism. Rather, it is now widely understood that what was happening to Belgrade could happen within the next few years to Beijing. More astute representatives of American imperialism fear that the deterioration in the international image of the United States will carry with it a serious political price. In a roundtable discussion on the ABC news program *Nightline* following the initial announcement of Milosevic's acceptance of

NATO's terms, former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger opined, 'We've presented to the rest of the world a vision of the bully on the block who pushes a button, people out there die, we don't pay anything except the cost of the missile...that's going to haunt us in terms of trying to deal with the rest of the world in the years ahead.'

Even among its NATO allies, there is nervousness over the international appetite of the United States and its willingness to use all methods to get what it wants. Publicly, European presidents and prime ministers genuflect obediently before the United States and proclaim eternal friendship. Privately, among themselves and in 'safe' rooms that they hope are not bugged by the CIA, these leaders wonder where, or against whom, the United States will make its next move. What happens if and when the interests of Europe collide directly with those of the United States? Last year the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* ran mug shots of Saddam Hussein. This year, of Slobodan Milosevic. Next year, who will it be? Whom will CNN proclaim to be the latest international villain, the first 'Hitler' of the new century?

Far more significant than the proclamations of NATO's solidarity was the announcement by the leaders of 15 European countries, on the very day of Yugoslavia's capitulation, that they will transform the European Union into an independent military power. 'The union,' they declared in an official statement, 'must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises without prejudice to actions by NATO.' Underlying this statement is the conviction of the European leaders that the ability of European capitalism to compete with the United States on a global scale—that is, to survive—depends upon a credible military force that is able to secure and defend its own international interests. For the European bourgeoisie, it is intolerable that only the United States should have the capacity to deploy military power in pursuit of geopolitical strategic advantages and economic interests. Thus, the competition among the major imperialist powers is now poised to assume, in the immediate aftermath of the onslaught against Yugoslavia, an overtly militaristic coloration.

Far from representing a humanitarian break with the past, the Balkan War of 1999 signals the virulent resurgence of its most malignant characteristics: the legitimization of the naked use of overwhelming military power against small countries in pursuit of strategic 'Big Power' interests, the cynical violation of the principle of national sovereignty and the de facto reestablishment of colonialist forms of subjugation, and the revival of inter-imperialist antagonisms that carry within them the seeds of a new world war. The demons of imperialism that first arose at the beginning of the 20th century have not been exorcised by the international bourgeoisie. They still haunt mankind as it enters the twenty-first.

### **The media and the war against Yugoslavia**

Propaganda plays a critical role in all wars. 'Think of the press,' the Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels once said, 'as a great keyboard on which the government can play.' But the scale, technological sophistication and impact of modern-day propaganda exceeds anything that could have been imagined even during the era of World War II. All the mind-numbing techniques employed by the advertising and entertainment industries find their consummate expression in the 'marketing' of war for a mass audience. The entire sordid enterprise depends upon the effective use of a single emotion-laden phrase that can be relied upon to disorient the public. In the 1998-99 bombing campaign against Iraq, that phrase was 'weapons of mass destruction.' To mobilize public opinion behind the attack on Yugoslavia, all the contradictions,

complexities and ambiguities of the Balkans were dissolved into a single phrase that was repeated day after day: 'ethnic cleansing.' The American and international public was bombarded with the same unrelenting message: The war is being waged to stop mass murder. The video clips of ethnic Albanian refugees streaming out of Kosovo were broadcast in a manner that left viewers entirely in the dark as to the historical and political context of what they were being shown. The fact that the loss of life in Kosovo had been relatively small, at least in comparison to communal conflicts occurring in other parts of the world, until after the bombing began was simply glossed over. As for the actual number of Kosovar Albanians killed directly by Serb military and paramilitary forces, the wild claims by US government and NATO spokesmen, which placed the figure at anywhere between 100,000 and 250,000, were entirely unsubstantiated and bore no relation to reality.

The comparisons routinely made between the conflict in Kosovo and the Holocaust were obscene. Those made between Serbia and Nazi Germany were simply absurd. When the World Court finally issued its politically-motivated indictment of Milosevic, the number of deaths for which he was held officially responsible was 391. No one would argue that Milosevic is a humanitarian, but there are people responsible for far more deaths than he, including America's own Henry Kissinger, who went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize. The entire propaganda campaign seemed at times to be buckling beneath the weight of its own mendacity and inanity. Still, that there existed any reason for the war, other than the official humanitarian motives claimed by the Clinton administration, was never acknowledged in the American mass media even by those who, in the most timid terms, raised questions about the decision to bomb Yugoslavia.

The media made no effort whatsoever to examine the historical background of the conflict. Critical issues such as the relationship between the economic policies imposed upon Yugoslavia by the International Monetary Fund and the resurgence of communalist tensions were never discussed publicly. Nor was there any critical review of the disastrous contribution of German and American policies in the early 1990s—specifically, the recognition of Slovenian, Croatian and Bosnian independence—to the outbreak of civil war in the Balkans. That the Serbs had any legitimate reason to be dissatisfied with the political and economic consequences of the sudden dissolution of Yugoslavia—a state that had existed since 1918—was not even mooted. No explanation was offered by the United States and the Western European powers for the glaring contrast between their attitude toward the territorial claims and ethnic policies of Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia on the one hand, and toward those of Serbia on the other. Why, for example, did the United States actively support in 1995 the 'ethnic cleansing' by Croatia of 250,000 Serbs living in Krajina province? No answer was forthcoming.

As a general rule, the media suppressed all information that lent even the slightest legitimacy to the actions of the Serb government. The most notorious example of deliberate falsification was the media's treatment of the proceedings at Rambouillet. First, it referred continuously to the Serb's rejection of the Rambouillet agreement—though all those who were familiar with the proceedings understood that there had been neither negotiations nor an agreement at Rambouillet. What the Serbs rejected was a nonnegotiable ultimatum.

Even more dishonest, the American and Western European media withheld critical information that might have prejudiced public opinion against the attack on Yugoslavia. The media simply did not report that the 'agreement' included an annex that demanded that the Serbs accept the right of NATO forces to move at will, not only through Kosovo but all portions of Yugoslavia. The significance of this clause was obvious: the United States deliberately confronted Milosevic with an ultimatum that it knew he could not possibly accept. Even after this information seeped out over the Internet, it was generally ignored in the mass media. Not until its edition of June 5, after the capitulation of Serbia, did the *New York Times*

finally report and even quote the crucial codicil. It even acknowledged that the removal of this codicil from the terms proffered by Chernomyrdin and Ahtisaari was a critical factor in persuading Milosevic to agree to the withdrawal of Serbian troops from Kosovo.

## Imperialism and the Balkans

To the extent that the media maintained its monomaniacal focus on the theme of ethnic cleansing, it deterred an examination of the more substantial and essential reasons for the decision of the Clinton administration to launch its assault against Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, with only a few honorable exceptions, US academic experts in the field of Balkan history and international politics showed little inclination to publicly challenge the propaganda campaign. Indeed, they lent a degree of intellectual credibility to the US government's humanitarian posturing by dismissing the very suggestion that any significant material interests were at stake in the Balkans.

As even a cursory study of the region reveals, this is certainly false. Kosovo is rich in marketable resources. Finally breaking its long silence on the subject, the *New York Times*—that pillar of the US State Department—carried an article on June 2, 1999, entitled, 'The Prize: Issue of Who Controls Kosovo's Rich Mines.' It began, 'A number of unofficial partition plans have been drawn up for Kosovo, all raising the question of who would control an important northern mining region. The bombing has made up-to-date production figures difficult to come by. Experts say the resources include large deposits of coal, along with some nickel, lead, zinc and other minerals.'

Of course, the presence of such resources cannot, in and of itself, provide an adequate explanation for the war. It would be too great a simplification of complex strategic variables to reduce the decision to launch a war to the presence of certain raw material in the targeted country. However, the concept of material interests embraces more than immediate financial gains for one or another industry or conglomerate. The financial and industrial elites of the imperialist countries determine their material interests within the framework of international geopolitical calculations. There are cases in which a barren strip of land, devoid of intrinsic value in terms of extractable resources, may still be viewed—perhaps due to geographical location or the vagaries of international political relationships and commitments—as a strategic asset of inestimable value. Gibraltar, which consists mainly of a large rock, is precisely such an asset. There are other regions which possess such extraordinary intrinsic value—notably the Persian Gulf—that the imperialist powers will stop at nothing to retain control of them.

The Balkans do not float above a sea of oil; nor is it a barren wasteland. But its strategic significance has been a constant factor in imperialist power politics. If only because of its geographic location, either as a critical transit point for Western Europe toward the east, or as a buffer against the expansion of Russia (and later the USSR) toward the south, the Balkans played a critical role in the international balance of power. Events in the Balkans led to the outbreak of World War I because the ultimatum delivered by Austria-Hungary to Serbia in July 1914 (shades of the US-NATO ultimatum 85 years later) threatened to destabilize the precarious equilibrium between the major European states.

Throughout the 20th century the attitude of the United States toward the Balkans has been determined by broad international considerations. During the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson's decision to champion the right of national self-determination was partly motivated by the desire to utilize the national aspirations of the Balkan people against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of the famous 'Fourteen Points'

formulated by Wilson as a basis for ending the World War championed the rights of Serbia, including the right of access to the sea (which is now threatened by the United States' encouragement of Montenegrin secessionism). After the conclusion of World War II, the deepening confrontation with the Soviet Union was the decisive factor in determining US policy toward the new regime in Belgrade led by Marshal Tito. The eruption in 1948 of a bitter conflict between Stalin and Tito had a dramatic impact upon Washington's assessment of Yugoslavia's role in world affairs. Viewing Tito's regime as an obstacle to Soviet expansion via the Adriatic Sea into the Mediterranean (and, thereby, toward both southern Europe and the Middle East), the United States became a determined advocate of Yugoslavia's unity and territorial integrity.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union altered Washington's relations with Belgrade. Without the specter of Soviet expansion, the United States no longer saw any need to retain its commitment to a unified Yugoslav state. American policy reflected a new set of concerns related to the rapid reorganization of the economies of the former USSR and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe on the basis of capitalistic market principles. After some initial hesitation, American policy makers were won to the view that the process of economic denationalization and the penetration of Western capital would be facilitated by the breakup of the old centralized state structures that had played so great a role in the Soviet-style bureaucratically-directed economies. The United States and its Western European allies then proceeded to orchestrate the dismantling of the unitary Yugoslav Federation. This was done, quite simply, by officially recognizing the republics of the old Federation—beginning with Slovenia, Croatia, and then Bosnia—as independent sovereign states. The results of this policy were catastrophic. As Professor Raju G.C. Thomas, a leading expert on the Balkans, has pointed out:

'There were no mass killings taking place in Yugoslavia before the unilateral declaration of independence by Slovenia and Croatia and their subsequent recognition by Germany and the Vatican, followed by the rest of Europe and the United States. There were no mass killings taking place in Bosnia before the recognition of Bosnia. Preserving the old Yugoslav state may have proved to be the least of all evils. Problems began when recognition or pressures to recognize occurred. The former Yugoslavia had committed no 'aggression' on its neighboring states. Surely then, the real 'aggression' in Yugoslavia began with the Western recognition of Slovenia and Croatia. The territorial integrity of a state that was voluntarily created and which had existed since December 1918 was swept aside. In 1991, new state recognition policy provided a method of destroying long-standing sovereign independent states. When several rich and powerful states decide to take a sovereign independent state apart through the policy of recognition, how is this state supposed to defend itself? There can be no deterrence or defense against this form of international state destruction. Indeed, the West led by Germany and later the US dismembered Yugoslavia through the policy of state recognition.[1]

The international strategic implications of the dissolution of the USSR provided yet another reason for the United States and NATO to encourage the dismantling of the old Yugoslav Federation. The United States was anxious to exploit the power vacuum created by the Soviet collapse to rapidly project its power eastward and assert control over the vast untapped reserves of oil and natural gas in the newly-independent Central Asian republics of the old USSR. Within this new geopolitical environment, the Balkans assumed exceptional strategic importance as a vital logistical staging ground for the projection of imperialist power, particularly that of the United States, toward Central Asia. Herein lay the ultimate source of the conflict between the United States and the regime of Milosevic. To be sure, Milosevic was neither opposed to the establishment of a market economy in Yugoslavia nor, for that matter, to the elaboration of a working relationship with the major imperialist

powers. But the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation, contrary to the initial expectations of Milosevic, worked to the disadvantage of Serbia.

One need not sympathize with the program of Milosevic to recognize that imperialist policies in the Balkans were shot through with a hypocritical double standard that weakened Serbia and endangered the entire Serbian community living in different parts of the old Federation. While actions taken by Croatian and Bosnian Muslim military forces—which included what came to be known as 'ethnic cleansing'—were largely viewed as legitimate measures of national self-defense, those of the Serbs were denounced as intolerable violations of international order. The logic of Yugoslav dissolution tended to criminalize every measure taken by Serbia to defend its national interests within the new state system. Recognition of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia transformed the Yugoslav army, in the eyes of the imperialist 'international community,' into aggressors who threatened the independence and sovereignty of new independent states. The actions of Serb minorities outside the borders of what remained of the old Federation were likewise viewed as examples of Yugoslav aggression. To the extent that Serbian dissatisfaction with the result of the carve-up of the Balkan peninsula proved disruptive to the far-reaching strategic aims of American imperialism, it aroused the ire of Washington and led it to conclude that Serbia had to be taught an unforgettable lesson.

### **The global eruption of US imperialism and the second 'American century'**

The assault on Yugoslavia was undertaken by the combined forces of NATO. But in its planning and execution, the war was an American enterprise. Not even Prime Minister Tony Blair's somewhat comical impersonation of Margaret Thatcher could conceal the fact that the United States, in the most literal sense, called the shots in this war. When the first cruise missiles were launched against Yugoslavia on March 24, it marked the fourth time in less than a year that the United States had bombed a foreign country. Earlier in the year, in pursuit of Saddam Hussein's phantom 'weapons of mass destruction,' the Clinton administration initiated a ferocious bombing campaign against Iraq. Indeed, the bombing of Iraq has become by now a permanent and routine feature of American foreign policy. The record of American military activity during the last 10 years is by any objective standard cause for astonishment and horror. A country that proclaims *ad nauseam* its love of peace has been engaged almost continuously in one or another military exercise beyond the borders of the United States. There have been no less than six major missions involving ground combat and/or bombing—Panama (1989), the Persian Gulf I (1990-91), Somalia (1992-93), Bosnia (1995), Persian Gulf II (1999) and Kosovo-Yugoslavia (1999). There has been, in addition, a series of occupations—Haiti (1994-), Bosnia (1995-) and Macedonia (1995-). The number of human beings who have lost their lives as the direct or indirect result of American military actions during the past decade is in the hundreds of thousands. Naturally, each of these episodes has been presented by the US government and media as benevolent peacemaking. They are, in reality, objective manifestations of the increasingly militaristic character of American imperialism.

There is an obvious and undeniable connection between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the arrogance and brutality with which the United States has pursued its international agenda throughout the 1990s. Substantial sections of the American ruling elite have convinced themselves that the absence of any substantial international opponent capable of resisting the United States offers a historically unprecedented opportunity to establish, through the use of military power, an

unchallengeable position of global dominance. Unlike the earlier post-World War II dreams of an 'American Century,' which were frustrated by the constraints placed by the existence of the Soviet Union on the global ambitions of the United States, policy makers in Washington and academic think tanks all over the country are arguing that overwhelming military superiority will make the twenty-first century America's. Unchecked by either external restraints or substantial domestic opposition, the mission of the United States is to remove all barriers to the reorganization of the world economy on the basis of market principles, as interpreted and dominated by American transnational corporations.

It is only necessary, they argue, for the United States to overcome any inclination to squeamishness over the use of military power. As Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* put it shortly after the outbreak of the war against Yugoslavia, 'The hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist—McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.... Without America on duty, there will be no America Online.'[2]

### **The Future of War and the Cult of Precision-Guided Munitions**

An unabashed and detailed elaboration of this perspective is to be found in a recently-published book, entitled *The Future of War*, by George and Meredith Friedman. The basic argument of the Friedmans—who are both specialists in strategic business intelligence—is that America's arsenal of precision-guided munitions has given it a degree of military superiority that will ensure world dominance for decades, if not centuries, to come. They write:

'While warfare will continue to dominate and define the international system, the manner in which wars are being waged is undergoing a dramatic transformation, which will greatly enhance American power. Indeed, the twenty-first century will be defined by the overwhelming and persistent power of the United States. We are arguing that the rise of American power is not merely another moment in a global system spanning five hundred years but is actually the opening of an entirely new global system. We are in a profoundly new epoch in which the world that revolved around Europe is being replaced by a world revolving around North America.'[3]

According to the Friedmans, this world-historical shift in the locus of global power was heralded by the Gulf War of 1991. 'Something extraordinary happened during Operation Desert Storm,' they proclaim. 'The sheer one-sidedness of the victory, the devastation of the Iraqi Army compared to a handful of casualties on the American side, points to a qualitative shift in military power.' The reason for the overwhelming character of the American victory was the deployment of precision-guided munitions, the first weapons whose trajectory is not controlled by the laws of gravity and ballistics. Capable of correcting their own course and homing in on their targets, 'precision-guided munitions transformed the statistical foundations of war and with it the calculus of both political and military power.' The Friedmans declare that the introduction of precision-guided munitions is an innovation that 'ranks with the introduction of firearms, the phalanx, and the chariot as a defining moment in human history.' As Europe 'conquered the world with the gun,' the emergence of precision-guided munitions marks the beginning of a new American-dominated epoch of history.[4] The Friedmans conclude:

'The twenty-first century will be the American century. This may seem an odd thing to say, since it is commonly believed that the 20th century was the American century and that, with its end, American preeminence is

drawing to a close. But the period since American intervention determined the outcome of World War I to the present was merely a prologue. Only the rough outlines of American power have become visible in the last hundred years, not fully formed and always cloaked by transitory problems and trivial challenges—Sputnik, Vietnam, Iran, Japan. In retrospect, it will be clear that America's clumsiness and failures were little more than an adolescent's stumbling—of passing significance and little note.<sup>[5]</sup>

Quite apart from the validity of the Friedmans' estimate of the historical implications of precision-guided munitions, the fact that their views reflect the thinking of a substantial layer of the policy-making elite in the United States is, by itself, of considerable objective significance. There is nothing more dangerous than a bad idea whose time has come. As has already been shown by the decision to confront Yugoslavia with a 'surrender or be destroyed' ultimatum, the strategists of American imperialism have convinced themselves that precision-guided munitions have made war an effective, viable and low-risk policy option.

The idea that military force is the decisive factor in history is hardly a new one. But examined theoretically, it expresses a vulgar and simplistic conception of the real causal relationships in the historical process. The politics of war and the technology of weaponry are not the essential factors in history. In reality both of these arise on the basis of and are ultimately determined by more essential socioeconomic factors. The introduction of a new weapon system can certainly influence the outcome of one or another battle, or even, depending on the circumstances, a war. But in the broad expanse of history, it is a subordinate and contingent factor. The United States presently enjoys a 'competitive advantage' in the arms industry. But neither this advantage nor the products of this industry can guarantee world dominance. Despite the sophistication of its weaponry, the financial-industrial foundation of the United States' preeminent role in the affairs of world capitalism is far less substantial than it was 50 years ago. Its share of world production has declined dramatically. Its international trade deficit increases by billions of dollars every month. The conception that underlies the cult of precision-guided munitions—that mastery in the sphere of weapons technology can offset these more fundamental economic indices of national strength—is a dangerous delusion. Moreover, for all their explosive power, the financing, production and deployment of cruise missiles and other 'smart' bombs are subject to the laws of the capitalist market and are at the mercy of its contradictions. The production of these weapons involves extraordinary expense; and, it should be remembered, their use does not involve the creation of wealth, but rather its destruction. For years to come, the wealth generated by productive labor will be used to pay off the debts that were accumulated to pay for the building of bombs that were exploded in the Balkans.

We doubt that Madam Albright troubles herself with such subtleties. Indeed, the infatuation with the 'wonders' of weapons technology and the 'miracles' they promise is most common among ruling elites who have arrived, whether they know it or not, at a historical dead end. Bewildered by a complex array of international and domestic socioeconomic contradictions that they hardly understand and for which there are no conventional solutions, they see in weapons and war a means of blasting their way through problems.

When viewed through the prism of practical political relations, the abiding faith in precision-guided munitions appears dangerous and reckless. No period in history has witnessed so rapid a development of technology. Each advance, no matter how spectacular, sets the stage for its rapid transcendence by even more extraordinary innovations in design and performance. The revolutionary advances in communications and information technology guarantee the more or less rapid diffusion of the underlying knowledge and skills upon which precision-guided munitions are based. The US monopoly of nuclear power—which President Truman

and his associates believed, back in 1945, would form the military foundation of the 'American Century' that was promised at the end of World War II—lasted less than five years. There is no reason to believe that the technology of the new weaponry will remain the exclusive property of the United States. But even if the United States is able to maintain its leadership in the development of precision-guided munitions, this will not guarantee that the wars of the next decade will prove as bloodless for Americans as those of the 1990s. The outrages committed by the United States inevitably intensify the pressure felt by those nations that consider themselves threatened to prepare a significant counterblow. Even in those cases where the costs of developing or purchasing precision-guided munitions technology prove prohibitive, cheaper but very lethal chemical, biological and, let us add, nuclear alternatives will be found. Russia already possesses ample stockpiles of all these alternatives. China, India, Pakistan and, of course, Israel also have substantial arsenals of lethal weaponry.

Though the resources of economically backward countries are not sufficient to compete with the US in the sphere of high-tech weaponry, those of Europe and Japan certainly are. Although they are careful to couch their statements in terms that do not indicate hostility to the United States, European analysts are stressing the need to substantially increase the EU's military spending. 'Europe's dependence on the US,' wrote the *Financial Times* of Britain on June 5, 'has been uncomfortably exposed.' Stressing the 'urgency' of the European Union's plan to develop its own military program, the *FT* stated: 'It is not that Europe should aim to match the US missile for missile and fighter for fighter. But it should have the technology, the industrial base and the professional military skills to ensure at least that it can operate side by side with the US rather than as a poor relation.'

## Back to the future: imperialism in the 21st century

The first half of the 20th century witnessed the most terrible waste of human life in world history. It has been estimated that more than 100 million people were killed in the course of World War I (1914-18) and World War II (1939-45). The origins of these wars, as the great revolutionary Marxists of the time explained, lay in the fundamental contradictions of world capitalism—between the essentially anarchic character of a market economy based on private ownership of the means of production and the objectively social character of the production process; between the development of a highly integrated world economy and the national state system within which bourgeois class rule is historically rooted. The world wars were directly precipitated by conflicts between the ruling classes in different imperialist countries over markets, raw materials and related strategic interests. The United States emerged out of World War II as the preeminent capitalist power. Germany, Italy and Japan had been vanquished. England and France were devastated by the cost of the war. The old inter-imperialist antagonisms did not disappear, but they were held in check in the face of the Cold War conflict between the US and the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 removed the political constraints upon inter-imperialist conflicts. The competing ambitions of the United States, Europe and Japan cannot be reconciled peacefully forever. The world of business is one of relentless and ruthless competition. Conglomerates that, for one or another reason, find it necessary to collaborate on one project today may, depending on the circumstances, be at each other's throats tomorrow. The relentless competition among conglomerates on a world scale—the eternal *bellum omnium contra omnes* (war of each against all)—ultimately finds its most developed and lethal

expression in open military conflict. The global integration of production processes does not lessen the conflict among imperialist powers, but, paradoxically, increases it. As the Friedmans write, for once correctly, 'Economic cooperation breeds economic interdependence. Interdependence breeds friction. The search for economic advantage is a desperate game that causes nations to undertake desperate actions, a fact that can be demonstrated historically.' [6]

The increasing frequency of military outbreaks during the 1990s is an objective symptom of an approaching international conflagration. Both World War I and World War II were preceded by a series of local or regional conflicts. As the major imperialist powers seek to expand their influence into the regions opened up for capitalist penetration by the collapse of the USSR, the likelihood of conflicts between them increases. At stake in major disputes—such as those that will inevitably arise over the allocation of booty from the oil of the Caspian and Caucasian regions—will be life-and-death issues of world power and position. Such issues do not, by their very nature, lend themselves to peaceful resolution. The basic tendency of imperialism moves inexorably in the direction of a new world war.

## The Balkan War and American Public Opinion

Despite all the efforts of the media to manufacture support for the war, the response of the American working class—that is, the overwhelming majority of the population—has been notably reserved. To be sure, there have been no significant manifestations of opposition to the war. But neither have there been any substantial displays of popular approval of the assault against Yugoslavia. In contrast to the unrestrained pro-war enthusiasm displayed by media personalities, the sentiments most commonly expressed by working people have been confusion and apprehension. The war has not been a popular topic of conversation. When asked how they feel about the war, working people generally reply that they do not understand what it is really all about. Naturally, they do not like what they have heard about 'ethnic cleansing.' But at the same time workers suspect that the causes of the fighting within Kosovo and throughout the former Yugoslavia are more complicated than they have been led to believe by the media. Far from exciting patriotic fervor, the obviously unequal character of the conflict and the impact of American bombs have contributed to the general sense of unease within the broad public. This assessment is supported by the measures taken by the Clinton administration, with the complicity of the media, to restrict as much as possible news about the death and destruction caused by American bombings. The decision to bomb the principal Yugoslav television station in Belgrade was taken after its coverage of the first major incidents of NATO bombings with serious loss of civilian life. In the weeks that followed that bloody event, live coverage by American correspondents of the impact of the intensifying bombardment of Yugoslavia all but ceased. The televised reports of Brent Sadler, perhaps the last CNN correspondent with a modicum of personal integrity, were brought to a halt. The administration clearly did not want the public to be too well informed about its use of cluster bombs and other real 'weapons of mass destruction' against the Serbian people.

An even more important indication of the Clinton administration's estimate of the popular mood was its obvious belief that the public was deeply opposed to placing American lives at risk in Yugoslavia. Certainly, there is nothing particularly edifying about a state of popular consciousness that is prepared to accept the killing of the people of another country as long as it does not cost any American lives. However, a war for which people are not prepared to accept any degree of sacrifice is

not one for which the government can claim deep public support. It is worth recalling that more than 25,000 American soldiers had already been killed in Vietnam, and several hundred thousand wounded, before public opinion shifted decisively against that war.

There is nothing more intellectually barren and politically superficial than the type of pseudo-radicalism that confuses jargon with analysis and insists on interpreting such a complex and contradictory phenomenon as mass public opinion in naively 'revolutionary' terms. It would be misleading and self-deluding to equate the relative absence of pro-war sentiment—that is, the mood of passive acquiescence that has prevailed throughout the bombing campaign—with a politically-conscious opposition to the imperialist assault on Yugoslavia. However, it would be no less incorrect to draw pessimistic conclusions from the present confused state of popular consciousness and to discount the very real potential for a change in the political orientation of the working class. Rather than superficial pessimism or optimism, it is necessary to investigate the objective state of class relations that has conditioned the response of different social strata to the Balkan War.

## The financial boom and imperialism's new constituency

Among the most remarkable features of the attack on Yugoslavia has been the leading role played by individuals who once opposed the Vietnam War and participated in anti-imperialist protest movements. With the exception of Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain—who had virtually no political history until he was selected by Rupert Murdoch to head the Labour Party—all the other major leaders of NATO's war would have claimed, earlier in their lives, to be opponents of imperialism. President Clinton, as everyone knows, avoided the draft, puffed marijuana, and publicly proclaimed his hatred of the US military. Javier Solana, the social democrat who had opposed the entry of Spain into NATO, is now the general secretary of the military alliance. The German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder spouted Marxist phrases as leader of the Social-Democratic youth movement and opposed the deployment of Pershing missiles only 15 years ago. Joschka Fisher, his foreign minister, headed a group of self-styled revolutionary street fighters in the 1970s, and later, as a leader of the Green Party, proclaimed his intransigent commitment to pacifism. A recent portrait of the German foreign minister, published by the *New York Times*, reported that 'Joschka Fisher vociferously defends the very policies he once denounced, infuriating the fundamentalists in his own Green Party.' Massimo D'Alema, Italy's prime minister, led the Communist Party before it was transformed into the Democratic Party of the Left. The political history of these individuals is not merely a confirmation of the well-known French adage, 'Before 30 a revolutionary; afterwards a swine.' It typifies, rather, the evolution of a broad social layer in contemporary bourgeois society.

The social structure and class relations of all the major capitalist countries have been deeply affected by the stock market boom that began in the early 1980s. Perpetually rising share values, especially the explosion in market valuations since 1995, have given a significant section of the middle class—especially among the professional elite—access to a degree of wealth they could not have imagined at the outset of their careers. Those who have actually grown rich comprise a relatively small percentage of the population. But in numerical terms, the 'newly rich' represent a substantial and politically powerful social stratum. Capitalist governments devote much of their time and energy to satisfying its expanding appetites and ever more exotic tastes. Virtually freed from all conventional worries about personal budgets and available cash, the newly rich enjoy a level of opulence in their personal lives that the

overwhelming mass of the population knows of only through movies, television and popular magazines.

The *New York Times* recently carried an interesting study of an important new trend in the United States real estate market: 'The million-dollar mansion—or multimillion-dollar mansion, in some cities—is emerging as a high-profile badge of the gilded late 1990's, not just in the traditional pockets of wealth, but also in Middle American cities like Memphis where such homes have been rare.'

These mansions, the *Times* noted, 'are emblematic of an economic divide: the wealth generated in the boom that began in late 1995, while touching many people, has gone disproportionately and in huge quantities to the richest 5 percent of the nation's households. They have pocketed most of the gain from the stock market run-up, which has created thousands of multimillionaires overnight. And they have conspicuously channeled a big chunk of their gains into mansions.'

Citing a study by New York University economist Edward N. Wolff, the *New York Times* reports that 'Rarely in history has there been such a rapid minting of rich people.... While the number of American households rose by 3 percent over the three-year period, the number of million-dollar households jumped 36.6 percent. Make the wealth cutoff \$10 million or more, and 275,000 households qualified in 1998, up from 190,000 in 1995, a 44.7 percent increase.'

The other side of this process is the deterioration of the economic position of the overwhelming majority of the American people during the same period. 'From his analysis of Federal Reserve data,' writes the *New York Times*, 'Mr. Wolff gleans another insight: While net worth grew for the richest 10 percent of the nation's households in recent years, the remaining 90 percent lost ground.'[7]

The account cited is only one snapshot of the social inequality that is ubiquitous in contemporary America. The widening social chasm within American society is fast approaching—if it has not already been reached—the point at which even the pretense of a broad-based social consensus, rooted in core democratic values, cannot be maintained. This situation is not only a product of the sheer scale of the difference between the average annual income of the top 10 percent of the population and that of everyone else. The specific character of the wealth-generating process—that is, enrichment through rising share values—quite naturally produces social and political attitudes that are of a deeply anti-working class and pro-imperialist character. The policies which have made possible the explosive rise in share values—the relentless pressure on wage levels, the constant demands for greater productivity, the massive cuts in social expenditures, the relentless use of 'downsizing' to maintain high levels of corporate profitability—have undermined the social position of the working class in the United States.

The international consequences of the policies that have sent the Dow Jones and NASDAQ averages skyrocketing have been, for the vast majority of the world's people who live in the less-developed countries, deeply tragic. The stock market boom has been fueled and sustained, above all, by the deflationary (or disinflationary) environment that has depended on the protracted decline of commodity prices for raw materials. The decline has not been simply the product of objective economic processes, but of ruthless policies pursued by the major imperialist powers to undermine the ability of 'third world' producers to raise commodity prices. The successful destruction of the pricing power of the OPEC oil cartel—in which the Gulf War of 1990-91 played a major role—is the most significant example of the relationship between the accumulation of wealth in the imperialist countries and the intensifying exploitation of the less-developed countries. Those in the advanced countries whose wealth is based on rising share values have benefited directly from this process. This does not, of course, mean that every individual who has invested in the stock market is a supporter of imperialist policies. But it is impossible to deny the broad social and political implications of these objective

economic processes and relationships.

In the midst of World War I, Lenin noted the link between the superprofits extracted by imperialism from the colonies and the political corruption of a section of the middle class and the labor bureaucracy. While the economic conditions and international relations of 1999 are certainly not identical to those of 1916, an analogous social process has been at work. The objective modus operandi and social implications of the protracted stock market boom have enabled imperialism to recruit from among sections of the upper-middle-class a new and devoted constituency. The reactionary, conformist and cynical intellectual climate that prevails in the United States and Europe—promoted by the media and adapted to by a largely servile and corrupted academic community—reflects the social outlook of a highly privileged stratum of the population that is not in the least interested in encouraging a critical examination of the economic and political bases of its newly-acquired riches.

## The state of the American and international labor movement

The growing chasm between the privileged strata that comprise capitalism's ruling elite and the broad mass of working people denotes an objectively high level of social and class tensions. It may appear that this assessment is contradicted by the absence of militant labor activism in the United States. But the low level of strike activity and other forms of mass social protest do not indicate social stability. Rather, the fact that the last decade has seen so few open manifestations of class conflict, despite rapidly growing social inequality, suggests that the existing political and social institutions of the US have become unresponsive to the accumulating discontent of the working class. Established social organizations such as the trade unions no longer function even in a limited way as conduits of popular grievances. The Democratic and Republican parties, which have virtually no direct contact with the popular masses, do not even acknowledge, let alone propose, solutions to the basic problems of working class life. The longer the grievances of the working class are ignored and repressed, the more explosive they ultimately become. At some point social tension, as it approaches 'critical mass,' must erupt on the surface of society.

The protracted decline and demise of the American trade union movement is one of the most fundamental changes in the social life of the United States during the last two decades. As recently as the 1960s, the Johnson administration could not conduct the Vietnam War without constantly taking into account the impact of its policies on the working class. President Lyndon Johnson resisted demands from the Federal Reserve and representatives of big business that he meet the rising costs of the war by cutting the level of social expenditures. He feared that austerity policies would further intensify the already high levels of class conflict and social disorder. In 1971 the Nixon administration attempted to resist workers' demands for better living conditions by establishing a pay board and an annual 5.5 percent limit on wage increases. To give a sense of the social climate of that era, let us recall that even a man like George Meany—the septuagenarian president of the AFL-CIO, who was viewed as the most right-wing figure in the American labor movement—denounced Nixon's efforts to control wages as 'the first step towards fascism.' Subsequently Meany, despite his rhetoric, agreed to collaborate with the pay board. However, in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and a mounting wave of strikes, Meany was compelled to quit the pay board and Nixon's wage control scheme collapsed.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, a combination of economic and political developments fundamentally altered to the advantage of the

American ruling class the domestic and international environment within which it operated. First, the major international economic recessions of 1973-75 and 1979-81 brought to an end the long post-World War II boom. Against the backdrop of rising unemployment—which the government promoted by raising interest rates to unprecedented levels—the corporations seized the opportunity to launch a sustained offensive against the trade unions. The signal for this attack came in August 1981, when President Ronald Reagan fired 11,000 striking air traffic controllers. Despite mass popular support for the controllers—which found expression in an anti-Reagan demonstration of 500,000 workers in Washington, DC, in September 1981—the AFL-CIO took no action to force the rehiring of the strikers. A pattern that would continue throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s was established. The union bureaucracy, which had long viewed rank-and-file militancy as a threat to its own privileged position, welcomed the defeats as an opportunity to deepen its direct collaboration with the employers. By the end of the 1980s, after an unbroken series of defeats in one industry after another, the trade unions had ceased to function as genuine defensive organizations of the working class in any meaningful sense of the term. Strikes, until the mid-1980s a persistent and explosive feature of American social life, fell year after year to record low levels. Wage cuts and mass layoffs, which had been traditionally met with bitter resistance, became commonplace throughout US industry.

Notwithstanding certain historical weaknesses of the American labor movement that made it exceptionally vulnerable to attack—such as its lack of independent political organization, the absence of any substantial socialist tendency, the generally low level of class consciousness and, last but not least, the disgusting extent of the corruption and gangsterism of the labor bureaucracy—the collapse of the trade unions in the United States was part of a broader international phenomenon. All over the world the old political parties and trade unions of the working class entered into a terminal crisis from the mid-1980s on. What was the essential objective cause of this worldwide process of decay?

### **The Emergence of the transnational corporation**

The global recessions of the 1970s and early 1980s led to a fundamental change in the basic forms of capitalist production. While there had been an immense growth in international trade following the end of World War II, the process of production proceeded, for the most part, within a national framework. While the multinational corporation did business in many countries, its manufacturing facilities operated on a national basis. For example, a US corporation, like Ford or General Motors, would have manufacturing facilities in different countries. But these facilities were intended to build products for the market of the country in which they were located.

The revolutionary developments in transportation and computerized communications technologies made possible an historic change in the organization and techniques of capitalist production. The multinational form of corporate organization was transcended by the transnational corporation. The essential significance of this change was that it had become possible to organize and coordinate manufacturing and services on a directly international basis. Nourished by massive daily movements of both capital and information, transnational corporations were able for the first time to establish globally integrated production systems. This allowed them to bypass the labor force in their 'national homeland' and effectively exploit regional and continental differences in wage levels and social benefits.

None of the existing mass organizations of the working class were either prepared for or capable of developing an effective response to the

revolutionary advances in technology and their far-reaching impact on the capitalist mode of production. Regardless of their official titles and formal political affiliations—whether they called themselves Socialist, Communist, Labor, or, as in the United States, openly proclaimed their loyalty to capitalism and the parties of big business—the old labor organizations based themselves on the national state as the unalterable framework of production. Assuming the eternal dependence of capitalist corporations on the directly available national labor force, the trade unions believed their own position to be impregnable. To the extent that they controlled the national supply of labor, they would retain in perpetuity the ability to extract concessions from the employers. The entire reformist ideology of the labor movement was based on this complacent nationalist perspective.

This national reformist perspective was ultimately rooted in the material interests of the bureaucracy. Therefore, the collapse of this perspective did not undermine in the least the bureaucracy's loyalty and subservience to capitalism. Rather, the bureaucracy devoted its energies to preserving its own privileges within the national state by attempting to force the working class to accept a lower standard of living.

### **The Collapse of the USSR**

The disintegration of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) and the collapse of the USSR were only the most extreme and explosive manifestations of the breakdown of the old bureaucratic and reformist parties of the working class. Of course, the Soviet Union represented a far greater historical achievement of the international working class than the trade unions of Western Europe and the United States. The CPSU held state power and ruled on the basis of the nationalized property forms that had been created in the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917. But despite this significant difference, the program and ideology of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy—which had long before usurped political power from the working class and exterminated the entire generation of Marxists who had led the socialist revolution—was essentially the same, in two fundamental respects, as that of the labor bureaucracies in the advanced capitalist countries.

First, the official Soviet doctrine of 'peaceful coexistence' was the Kremlin's version of the class collaboration practiced by the labor bureaucracies in the West. Contrary to the hysterical propaganda of the American media, Marxism played no role whatsoever in the policies of the Stalinist leaders of the USSR. The attitude of the typical Soviet bureaucrat toward the very possibility of revolutionary upheavals—both beyond and within the borders of the USSR—was a combination of personal fear and political revulsion. Desiring nothing so much as to enjoy in peace the luxuries to which their positions in the bureaucracy entitled them, the Stalinist leaders sought not the overthrow of world imperialism but an accommodation to it.

Second, the economic and social program administered by the bureaucracy was a peculiar version of the nationalism practiced by their reformist counterparts in Western Europe. The so-called 'socialism' espoused by the Kremlin regime based itself mainly on the resources available within the USSR. The Stalinist bureaucracy aspired to nothing more ambitious than a Soviet version of a national welfare state. The basic fallacy of this program was that the development of the Soviet economy depended, in the final analysis, upon the resources of the world economy and its international division of labor. It was not possible to maintain on the basis of national self-sufficiency a viable social welfare state, let alone an advanced socialist society. The introduction of globally-integrated production widened the gap between the advanced capitalist countries and

the Soviet Union. The problem was not merely technological: there was simply no place in the Stalinist system for transnational forms of production. Even between the USSR and the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe, economic relations remained on an extremely primitive level. By the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he had no better answers for the challenge posed by the globalization of capitalist production than his opposite numbers in the bureaucracies of the American and Western European labor movements. All his desperate efforts to improvise a solution to the deepening social and political problems came to naught. The catastrophic Stalinist experiment with 'socialism in one country'—which had from the beginning represented a repudiation of the principles of socialist internationalism upon which the October Revolution had been based—came to a disastrous end with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

### A crisis of leadership and perspective

The present political disorientation of the working class is much better understood when placed in the context of the global economic transformations, political catastrophes and organizational collapses of the last two decades. Imagine an army of soldiers surrounded on all sides by powerful enemies. In the midst of battle its leaders have deserted, taking with them arms and supplies. The working class finds itself in an analogous position. It has been betrayed by the parties and organizations to which it had given its support and upon which it had relied. Complicating matters is the fact that the worthlessness of its old organizations and leaders is not merely a matter of subjective errors and personal corruption. Rather, it is deeply rooted in objective economic processes that have dramatically affected the mode of production and class relations. Therefore, what the working class requires is not merely a change of faces in the old organizations—or, to be more precise, in what is left of them. There is no 'kiss of life' that can resuscitate the moribund and reactionary bureaucratic trade union and political organizations of the past. The sooner they are kicked aside, the better. What the working class now requires is a new revolutionary international organization, whose strategy, perspective and program correspond to the objective tendencies of world economy and historical development.

There are, we know very well, legions of pessimists who are convinced that there exists no possibility whatsoever of building such an international revolutionary movement. One might note that the most incorrigible of these pessimists are to be found precisely among those who not so long ago placed full confidence in the trade unions and believed deeply in the permanence of the USSR. Yesterday they were convinced that bureaucratically administered reformism would last forever. Today they believe with no less conviction in the eternal triumph of capitalist reaction. But underlying the giddy optimism of yesterday and the demoralized pessimism of today is a certain type of intellectual and political superficiality, whose characteristic features are an unwillingness and inability to examine events within the necessary historical framework, and a disinclination to investigate the contradictions that underlie the highly misleading surface appearance of social stability. There are other characteristics—especially among those who draw their paychecks from university bursars—that contribute to and aggravate these intellectual weaknesses, namely, a certain lack of personal courage, integrity, and simple honesty.

Confidence in the revolutionary role of the working class and the objective possibility of socialism is not a matter of faith, but of theoretical insight into the objective laws of capitalist development and knowledge of history—particularly that of the 20th century. The last 99 and a half years

have seen no shortage of revolutionary struggles of the working class—Russian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Chinese, Chilean, Argentinean, Vietnamese, Hungarian, Austrian, South African, Ceylonese and, yes, American. This short list is far from complete.

What then, is the objective basis for a resurgence of revolutionary struggle by the working class as we enter the twenty-first century? Paradoxically, the very changes in the objective processes of world capitalism that contributed to the disorientation and weakening of the working class during the last two decades have laid the foundation for a renewal of open class struggle, but on a far broader basis than was previously possible. The principal weakness of the previous forms of class struggle lay in their national insularity. Even where the international unity of the proletariat was proclaimed and celebrated, objective conditions worked against the development of the class struggle as a unified international process. But the possibility of transcending this limitation is present in the process of globally-integrated production. This development of capitalism not only confronts the working class with the objective necessity of conducting its struggles on an international basis; the economic transformations have also created the objective means of effecting this international unity. First, the activities of the transnational corporations and the fluidity of global capital movements have led to an immense growth of the working class on an international scale. In countries and regions where, only 30 years ago, there hardly existed a working class, the proletariat has since emerged as a mass force. The proletariat of East Asia, which comprised a mere fraction of the region's population only a generation ago, now numbers in the tens of millions. Second, the communications technology that underlies transnational production will inevitably facilitate the coordination of the class struggle—both in terms of strategy and logistics—on a global scale.

### Internationalism and nationalism

The impediments to the globalization of the class struggle and the international unification of the working class are less of a technical than of a political and ideological character. The protracted crisis of the international workers movement found perhaps its most reactionary political reflection in the upsurge of nationalism. The loss of political confidence in the revolutionary capacities of the working class and the prospects of socialist revolution contributed to a resurgence of nationalist programs and ideologies. In many cases, the historically retrograde character of this tendency was disguised by the pseudo-left demagogic of 'national self-determination' and 'national liberation.' Seeking to evade the difficult task of combating all forms of chauvinism—whether based on language, religion or ethnicity—and effecting the unity of all sections of the working class within countries with heterogeneous populations, innumerable petty-bourgeois tendencies have chosen instead to base themselves on one or another national community. The cynical and largely ignorant use of Marxist jargon does not change the fact that the essential content of their policy has been the elevation of national or ethnic identity above class consciousness and, flowing from this, the subordination of the objective interests of the working class to the political and financial interests of the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

There is reason to believe that the high tide of the nationalist resurgence may have already been reached. Indeed, the impact of the events in Yugoslavia must contribute to undermining the prestige of nationalism and the political credibility of the demand for self-determination. The horrors of the inter-communal conflicts that have ravaged the Balkans have exposed the reactionary implications of nationalism. What has been achieved by the dissolution of Yugoslavia? The sordid machinations of

Milosevic in Serbia, Tudjman in Croatia, Kucan in Slovenia and Izetbegovic in Bosnia have cost the lives of tens of thousands, and for what? The entire economic and cultural level of the Balkans has been lowered immeasurably. 'Independent' Bosnia is a miserable imperialist protectorate. 'Independent' Croatia lives off whatever crumbs the imperialists are willing to throw it. Serbia has been devastated. And as for Kosovo, it has been divided into several zones of occupation. Its 'national liberation movement,' the KLA, has no future except as the designated gendarmerie of the United States. All of the national and religious communities have been victimized by the civil wars. All the events surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia stand as a bitter indictment of nationalism.

There is yet another aspect of the Yugoslav experience from which the international working class will be compelled to draw lessons. The one-sided nature of the military conflict will serve to undermine the myths that have surrounded the perspective of wars of national liberation—i.e., that the defeat of imperialism is to be achieved principally on the basis of military conflict, rather than through the methods of world socialist revolution. Petty-bourgeois radical romanticists were enraptured by the Guevarist perspective on 'One, two, many Vietnams.' That delusion has turned into 'One, two, many Iraqs.' And what about Vietnam? For all the heroic sacrifices of the Vietnamese masses, their wars of national liberation, spanning 30 years, did not free them from imperialist domination. Nearly 25 years after the capture of Saigon, the IMF is able to exert more influence over the policies of Hanoi than Nixon and Kissinger ever could with American B-52s.

As long as there is imperialism, there will be armed struggles conducted by oppressed nations. But the basic and decisive form of the struggle against imperialism is the revolutionary political struggle of the working class. Within this framework, to emphasize the immense historical importance of the class struggle in the advanced capitalist countries—above all, within the United States—does not suggest any degree of arrogance or disdain toward the workers and oppressed masses in the less developed countries. Rather, it flows from a realistic appraisal of the international balance of class forces and an understanding of the explosive character of the social contradictions within the imperialist centers. Those who deny the possibility of socialist revolution in the United States are not only denying, as a practical matter, the possibility of socialism anywhere. They are actually abandoning any hope for the future of mankind. However complex the interaction of world struggles and however unpredictable the actual sequence of events, there can be no doubt that their final outcome will be decisively influenced by the development of the class struggle in the United States.

For the present, it is an undeniable social fact that the level of political consciousness within the American working class is very low. Let it be said, however, that this is not a failing that is only to be observed among the workers. Consciousness is influenced by events—not only for the worse but also for the better. The underlying contradictions of American society will, in the final analysis, result in profound and, for many, unexpected changes in mass consciousness. Nowhere is it written that the social tensions that are so deeply embedded in the structure of American class relations can only express themselves in such tragic and demented forms as the shooting at Columbine High School. These tensions can and will find more humane, democratic and revolutionary forms of expression.

political unification of the working class, but also the means. The extraordinary advances in computerized communications technology—above all, the creation of the World Wide Web—have the most far-reaching historical implications for the development of the class struggle. In a manner and at a speed that could hardly have been imagined even at the start of this decade, the innumerable obstacles that limited communications between socialist and progressive political tendencies among intellectuals, students and workers have been swept away. The monopoly of the capitalist media over the dissemination of information has been gravely weakened. The possibility of reaching a mass audience is now available. The Yugoslav war revealed the enormous potential and political significance of the Internet. Even after Yugoslav television broadcast facilities were bombed, information about the impact of NATO attacks continued to reach an international audience via the Internet. Many critical pieces of information, such as the secret annex to the Rambouillet agreement, found their way to an international audience because of this remarkable communications technology.

In February 1998 the International Committee of the Fourth International founded the *World Socialist Web Site* ([www.wsws.org](http://www.wsws.org)). We recognized in this technology the potential to present to a broad international audience, on a daily basis, a Marxist analysis of world events. We were convinced that the WSWs could play a decisive role in the development of that which has been lacking for so many decades—a genuine international Marxist political culture. What was needed, we believed, was not simplistic slogans and jargon, but a serious examination of events. The long history of our tendency—whose origins date back to the struggle conducted by Leon Trotsky against the Stalinist perversion of Marxism and its betrayal of the October Revolution—provided the necessary intellectual substance to sustain daily commentary. Confident in the strength of our ideas, we were anxious to encourage a dialogue with readers reflecting a wide range of viewpoints. We continue to believe that such a discussion will facilitate a crystallization of socialists from all over the world around a genuinely internationalist revolutionary program.

The experiences of the past year have demonstrated the importance of the work that has been undertaken by the *World Socialist Web Site* to thousands of readers in dozens of countries. In the aftermath of the war against Yugoslavia, there will be an even greater and more urgent need for political discussion and theoretical clarification. The editorial board of the WSWs calls on its readers to participate in this discussion, to do everything in their power to extend the influence of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and in this way lay the foundations for the growth of the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

#### Notes:

1. 'Nations, States and War,' in *The South Slav Conflict*, edited by Raju G.C. Thomas and H. Richard Friman (New York and London: 1996), p. 225.
2. *New York Times*, March 28, 1999.
3. *The Future of War: Power, Technology & American World Dominance in the 21st Century* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996), p. ix.
4. *Ibid.*, p. x.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. *New York Times*, June 6, 1999.

## The role of the World Socialist Web Site

The advent of globally integrated production has, as we have already explained, created not only the objective conditions for the international



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