

David N. Gibbs, historian and author, discusses threat of US war against Iran

Barry Grey
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The World Socialist Web Site spoke on January 3 with David N. Gibbs, professor of history at the University of Arizona and author of a 2009 book on the Kosovo War, First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia. The WWSW reviewed the book (See: "A sharp exposé of US 'humanitarian intervention' in the former Yugoslavia—but some false conclusions") and subsequently interviewed Professor Gibbs about his work (See "An interview with David N. Gibbs"). Professor Gibbs, who has written extensively and critically on US foreign policy, publicly opposed the US-NATO war in Libya, publishing articles in the Guardian, Counterpunch and other journals.

Barry Grey: The situation is growing extremely tense and explosive. The general presentation in the media puts the onus on Iran. How do you see it?

David Gibbs: This is all predicated on the idea of the sanctity of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT), and the treaty itself is a deeply flawed document that has very asymmetrical requirements for the "have" nuclear powers and "have not" powers. Even as such, it's a document that has always been violated, as far as I know, by all of the nuclear powers, with the possible exception of Russia.

The document puts requirements on the non-nuclear powers not to obtain nuclear weapons. That's what's being applied here. It also has a clear requirement that the existing nuclear powers must act in good faith to eventually give up their nuclear weapons and achieve multilateral disarmament. Now, there's nothing in the history of American policy, or British policy, or French policy to suggest that they have ever acted in good faith to achieve that objective. They are therefore in violation of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, so it's somewhat ironic that this document is being used as a weapon against Iran.

By all indications the United States has acted very provocatively toward Iran, constantly threatening them with war, and that's something that raises the danger that they would consider nuclear weapons acquisition. And yet, in spite of that, there still is today really no hard evidence that they have done any nuclear weapons acquisition or made any serious violations of the NPT. This is not to defend the Iranian regime of Ahmadinejad, which is in many obvious ways a very ugly regime.

I think the context of the Libyan war is significant because it's being seen to be a sensational victory, and military victory always induces a tremendous sense of hubris and desire for more war. It creates an atmosphere in which war is seen as a positive thing, and that produces a dangerous arrogance in the foreign policy elites in Washington and Europe. I fear that could increase the likelihood of a confrontation with Iran.

BG: It seems that the new sanctions Obama signed into law are really tantamount to economic warfare.

DG: They could certainly be looked at in that way. There's something else as well. I'm not a big fan of Obama, but I don't think he's stupid enough to actually want war with Iran. I think he sees himself as having his plate full already in the aftermath of Iraq and with Afghanistan. On the other hand, he's sensitive to counterpressures and accusations that he's weak on military affairs. For reasons that I've never quite fully understood, the Democrats are seen as unenthusiastic about the military, when there's nothing really to support that. But that's the perception.

Obama wants to project a firm image before the elections, especially given that he is going to run on his "foreign policy achievements," or what are perceived as foreign policy achievements, such as the victory over Libya. So this is seen as another part of his overall image of being a strong, confident leader in the area of foreign policy, even if he may be a disaster on domestic policy.

He wants to look confrontational over Iran, but I think he wants to stop short of actually going to war with Iran because he must be well aware of the tremendous risks that would entail. Here's the problem. Once you start confronting Iran in this way, you, so to speak, get the ball rolling toward military intervention whether you like it or not. America's credibility has been committed, and if you commit America's credibility to confronting Iran, and Iran refuses to kowtow to US wishes, then you either have the option of looking once again weak and losing credibility, or escalating and eventually using military force.

Obama has now committed American credibility to achieving some kind of dominance over Iran and getting some result that can be called a success. That's a very dangerous situation that could lead to war, possibly whether Obama wants it or not. Blundering into war, we've seen this many times.

BG: How much credibility do you give to the presentation that the central issue with Iran is the threat of their obtaining nuclear weapons? This has become the casus belli. Is this really a cover for other interests?

DG: That's a good question. I tend to be an economic determinist and I'm always looking for some economic angle, some kind of interest. I'm not really finding a good one, let's put it that way, in the sense that I can't imagine there would be any interest of any big sector, including oil, to have a war with Iran. It would be destabilizing for the whole Middle East and the oil companies would have to know that.

The Israelis do seem to want a confrontation with Iran, at least some of them do. They've been more or less open about that fact. And so

perhaps pressure from Israel is a factor here.

In general, the United States has become somewhat addicted to war.

BG: The basic analysis that we've made for some time is that the decline in the world economic position of the United States over the past three decades or so has led the ruling class to increasingly turn to military means. The United States still has an overwhelming military supremacy. Increasingly it turns to military means in an attempt to offset and overcome the impact of its economic decline.

DG: I think that's a fair analysis. In an economic crisis in the context of long-term unemployment there is a tendency to fall back on the military, and that creates a culture of militarism, to some extent based on a vested interest, which is the military-industrial complex. That's certainly one factor here.

BG: If you take the whole structure of American society and American politics internally, there's been a huge growth in the political power of the military, the military-intelligence apparatus, over the past 25 years or so. You really have a situation where to a considerable extent the military exercises veto power over major foreign policy decisions.

DG: I don't at this point really know enough about the internal politics of the uniformed military to say exactly how it is responding to this issue. They were divided on Iraq. They were certainly divided on the Balkans. The military influence goes well beyond the uniformed military and extends to the civilian as well. Private sector firms also benefit from war-like activity, even if they don't have to pay much of a price for it.

There's no question that the Persian Gulf is of vital importance for all sorts of obvious reasons. The US is quite open about that fact. The Central Command has become the most important command of the US military precisely for obvious economic reasons. In that context, you want a regime that you have some control over, or one that at least is closely allied with countries that have similar interests, such as Saudi Arabia. The only two regimes in the region over which we have no control are Iran and Syria.

There are petty aspects as well. The US foreign policy elite has never forgiven Iran for overthrowing the Shah and for capturing the US embassy and humiliating the United States. There's still a strong grudge that's felt very deeply about this.

Somehow that explanation, like the Israel explanation, seems unsatisfactory to me in that it seems incomplete. To some extent I would have to say ultimately that I don't have a good explanation for the warlike atmosphere. I'm somewhat mystified.

BG: I'm not arguing that it is absolutely inevitable that there will be a war in the near future. However, there are many cases in history of the unthinkable happening, including the First World War and, for that matter, the Second World War. After the First World War the general consensus was that there could never be another world war because it was so catastrophic, including leading to the Russian Revolution.

There is also the increasing pressure on Iran economically, diplomatically, politically, militarily to try to influence developments within the country—to try to develop some kind of movement that could result in regime-change or completely destabilize the existing government. My impression is that the immediate impact of the latest sanctions, which has caused a catastrophic fall in the currency of Iran, falls most sharply on more affluent middle-class layers, which are already more or less opposed to Ahmadinejad.

Do you think there is a broader agenda beyond Iran? Ultimately things seem to be pointing in the direction of a confrontation with China.

DG: A big issue since the end of the Cold War has been how do you justify a US military that is not only the biggest in the world, but almost as big as the rest of the world combined? During the Cold War at least you had the Soviet Union, which was a halfway credible, at least for public purposes, justification for this. But the Soviet Union disappeared and basically nothing really happened in terms of a major downsizing of the US military.

China is a tougher one, because there's a whole section of the economy that is so profoundly interlinked with China that they are a very powerful lobby group against confrontation with China, because it would damage their interests. So a full-blown confrontation with China would be more problematic. On the other hand, you have some things going on, such as the stationing of US troops in Australia, that do seem to be predicated on the idea of confrontation with China.

BG: What do you think would be the consequences of a war with Iran?

DG: There are all sorts of possibilities. The most obvious one would be the destabilization of Iraq, where Iran has considerable influence. Possibly also Afghanistan, where they have some influence. Iran has been very cooperative with US objectives in Iraq, and to some extent in Afghanistan as well. You could get a re-ignition of the Iraqi civil war. In terms of the longer-term or larger consequences, there is a range of possibilities, including the use of terrorism. The danger of a generalized destabilization is a possibility.

BG: Do you want to say anything about the consequences of the general militaristic policy for democratic rights at home? Obama just signed the defense authorization act.

DG: A basic point of the American system historically has been a high degree of protection of freedom of expression, generally higher than countries such as Britain, with its official secrets act, its libel laws and such. The United States has historically been better than Britain and most European countries in that respect. What we have been seeing in the war on terror is a reversal of that historical tendency. Now one thinks of the period of the war on terror, seeing foreign policy leading to repression at home. With Obama, it is becoming bipartisan.



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