

Barack Obama and a quarter-century of US wars

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In a front-page article published on May 15, the *New York Times* calls attention to a significant milestone in the presidency of Barack Obama: “He has now been at war longer than Mr. Bush, or any other American president.” Obama overtook his predecessor on May 6. But with eight months still to go in the White House, he is on target to set yet another record. The *Times* writes: “If the United States remains in combat in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria until the end of Mr. Obama’s term—a near-certainty given the president’s recent announcement that he will send 250 additional Special Operations forces to Syria—he will leave behind an improbable legacy as the only president in American history to serve two complete terms with the nation at war.”

On the way to setting his record, Mr. Obama has overseen lethal military actions in a total of seven countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. The list is expanding rapidly, as the United States escalates its military operations in Africa. The efforts to suppress the Boko Haram insurgency involve a buildup of US forces in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad.

Mark Landler, the author of the *Times* article, notes Obama’s status as a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2009 without any sense of irony. Rather, he portrays the president as “trying to fulfill the promises he made as an antiwar candidate...” Obama “has wrestled with this immutable reality [of war] from his first year in the White House...”

Landler informs his readers that Obama “went for a walk among the tombstones in Arlington National Cemetery before giving the order to send 30,000 additional troops into Afghanistan.” Landler recalls a passage from his 2009 speech accepting the Nobel Prize in which Obama wearily lamented that humanity needed to reconcile “two seemingly irreconcilable truths—that war is sometimes necessary, and war at some level is an expression of human folly.”

During the Obama years, folly has clearly held the upper hand. But there is nothing that Landler’s hero can do. Obama has found his wars “maddeningly hard to end.”

The recent death of Special Warfare Operator First Class Charles Keating IV in a firefight with ISIS forces has contradicted Obama’s account of what the US forces are doing in Iraq. The *Times*, choosing its words carefully, writes that

Keating’s death “made the administration’s argument that the Americans were only advising and assisting Iraqi forces seem ever less plausible.” To state the matter bluntly, Obama has been lying to the American people.

Aside from its intrinsic dishonesty, the *Times*’ portrayal of Obama lacks the essential element required by genuine tragedy: the identification of the objective forces, beyond his control, that determined the actions of the president. If Mr. Landler wants his readers to shed a tear for this peace-loving man who, upon becoming president, made drone killings his personal specialty and turned into something akin to a moral monster, the *Times* correspondent should have attempted to identify the historical circumstances that determined Obama’s “tragic” fate.

But this is a challenge the *Times* avoids. It fails to relate Obama’s war-making record to the entire course of American foreign policy over the past quarter-century. Even before Obama entered office in 2009, the United States had been at war on an almost continuous basis since the first US-Iraq War of 1990-91.

The pretext for the first Gulf War was Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait in August 1990. But the violent US reaction to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s dispute with the emir of Kuwait was determined by broader global conditions and considerations. The historical context of the US military operation was the imminent dissolution of the Soviet Union, which was finally carried out in December 1991. The first President Bush declared the beginning of a “New World Order.”

The product of the first socialist revolution in 1917, the Soviet Union had functioned—especially following the conclusion of World War II in 1945—as a restraint on the deployment of American military power. Moreover, the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949—which, in historical terms, was bound up with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia—placed further obstacles in the path of US imperialism.

The Stalinist regimes pursued essentially nationalistic policies, and systematically undermined and betrayed working-class and anti-imperialist movements all over the world. But to the extent that the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China provided limited political and material support to anti-

imperialist movements in the “Third World,” it denied the US ruling class a free hand in the pursuit of its own interests. These limitations were demonstrated—to cite the most notable examples—in the US defeats in Korea and Vietnam, the compromise settlement of the Cuban missile crisis, and the acceptance of Soviet domination of the Baltic region and Eastern Europe.

In the final analysis, the existence of the Soviet Union and an anti-capitalist regime in China deprived the United States of the possibility of unrestricted access to and exploitation of the human labor, raw materials and potential markets of a large portion of the globe—including, and especially, much of the Eurasian land mass. It also compelled the United States to compromise to a degree greater than it would have preferred in negotiations over economic and strategic issues with its major allies in Europe and Asia, as well as with smaller countries that exploited the tactical opportunities provided by the US-Soviet Cold War.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, combined with the unrestrained restoration of capitalism in China following the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989, was seen by the American ruling class as an opportunity to carry out a massive restructuring of global geopolitics with the aim of establishing the hegemony of the United States. The overwhelming support for this operation within the elites arose from the belief that the United States could reverse the protracted erosion of its global economic position through the ruthless utilization of its overwhelming military power.

The Defense Policy Guidance drafted by the Department of Defense in February 1992 unambiguously asserted the hegemonic ambitions of US imperialism: “There are other potential nations or coalitions that could, in the further future, develop strategic aims and a defense posture of region-wide or global domination. Our strategy must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.”

The 1990s saw a persistent use of US military power, most notably in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The brutal restructuring of the Balkan states, which provoked a fratricidal civil war, culminated in the US-led 1999 bombing campaign to compel Serbia to accept the secession of the province of Kosovo. Other major military operations during that decade included the intervention in Somalia (which ended in disaster), the military occupation of Haiti, the bombing of Sudan and Afghanistan, and repeated episodes of bombing attacks on Iraq.

The events of September 11, 2001 provided the opportunity for the launching of the “War on Terror,” a propaganda slogan that provided an all-purpose justification for military operations throughout the Middle East, Central Asia and, with increasing frequency, Africa. The military strategy of the United States was revised in line with the new doctrine of “preventive warfare,” adopted by the US in 2002. This doctrine, which violated existing international law, decreed that the United

States could attack any country in the world that was judged to pose a potential threat—not only of a military, but also an economic character—to American interests.

The administration of the second President Bush ordered the invasion of Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001. In speeches that followed 9/11, Bush used the phrase “wars of the twenty-first century.” In this case, Bush spoke with great precision. The “War on Terror” was, from the beginning, conceived as an unending series of military operations all over the globe. One war would necessarily and inevitably lead to another. Afghanistan proved to be a dress rehearsal for the invasion of Iraq. The scope of military operations continuously widened. New wars were started while the old ones continued. The cynical invocation of human rights was used to wage war against Libya and overthrow the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. The same hypocritical pretext was employed to organize a proxy war in Syria. The consequences of these wars, in terms of human lives and suffering, are incalculable.

The strategic logic of the US drive for global hegemony has led to conflicts that extend beyond bloody neocolonial operations in the Middle East and Africa. The geopolitical ambitions of the United States have led to increasingly dangerous confrontations with China and Russia. In fact, the ongoing regional wars are becoming transformed into component elements of the rapidly escalating conflict of the United States and its European and Asian allies with Russia and China.

The *New York Times* provides not so much as a hint of the deeper objective causes, lodged in the contradictions of American and world imperialism, that made the Obama presidency a time of unending war. Nor does it forewarn its readers that the next administration, regardless of who occupies the White House—whether the president’s name is Clinton, Trump or, for that matter, Sanders—will offer not only more of the same, but much worse. The issue of war remains the “great unmentionable” in this election year.

But this silence must be broken. The alarm must be sounded. The working class and youth within the United States and throughout the world must be told the truth. If war is to be stopped and a global catastrophe averted, a new and powerful mass international movement, based on a socialist program and strategically guided by the principles of revolutionary class struggle, must be built.



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