# Matt Duss, Christopher Hitchens and the lies of the pro-imperialist “left”

**Eric London**
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In the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, mass demonstrations involving tens of millions of people took place in the United States and across the world. A section of the middle class “left” took part in these demonstrations, which brought together a broad cross-section of the population, including many young people and workers, in opposition to a war that would last nearly two decades and kill over 1 million people. At the time, individuals and political tendencies associated with groups like the Green Party and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) participated in the demonstrations and presented themselves as anti-war.

Twenty years later, groups like the DSA and Greens not only support imperialist war, in some cases their political representatives are leading it. The DSA’s four elected members of Congress voted unanimously for the Biden administration’s $40 billion in military spending to fight Russia in Ukraine. The German Green Party is part of the coalition government carrying out the rearmament of German imperialism. Pabloite and Morenoite groups like the International Socialist League urge the imperialist powers to send more weapons to neo-Nazi Ukrainian militias.

A June 1 article by Matt Duss in *The New Republic* entitled “Why Ukraine Matters for the Left” is a milestone in the exposure of the pseudo-left’s pro-imperialist political essence.

Duss is a top foreign policy adviser for Bernie Sanders who typifies the social layer that has now become a main constituency of the Biden administration’s war against Russia. According to a profile in *The Nation*, Duss “first became involved in politics via anti-globalization activism and Ralph Nader’s 2000 presidential campaign.” A February 2020 *Foreign Policy* article noted that “Music, not foreign policy, was one of Duss’s biggest life passions—until the 9/11 attacks galvanized in him a sense of wanting to do more on US politics and policy toward the Middle East.” He developed a career as a critic of the war in Iraq, telling *The Nation*, “I was just uncomfortable with America sending troops around the world.”

It is significant, then, that Duss has written an article denouncing left-wing opponents of imperialist war and adopting the argument made by Christopher Hitchens in his December 2001 article attacking left-wing opponents of the US “War on Terror.”

The first sentence of Duss’ article reads, “Weeks after the September 11 attacks, Christopher Hitchens wrote a piece in *The Atlantic* castigating an American left he saw as unwilling to recognize the enemy that had just attacked the United States or support appropriate measures to confront it.”

Duss says Hitchens was wrong to support the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but Duss then states:

> There is, however, a line from Hitchens that I’ve been thinking a lot about lately as I consider the Biden administration’s response to Russia’s war on Ukraine and the debate within the U.S. left about it. All the left’s objections, Hitchens wrote, “boil down to this: Nothing will make us fight against an evil if that fight forces us to go to the same corner as our own government.”

At the time of its publication, Hitchens’ article, “Stranger in a strange land: The dismay of an honorable man of the left,” attracted significant attention and generated a wave of disgust over Hitchens’ naked prostration before the war hysteria promoted by the Bush administration.

In the article, Hitchens, who had been a prominent left cultural critic, argued that September 11 meant “the left” must forget its criticisms of US imperialism and support the War on Terror. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, “Hitchens’ recent comments on the September 11 World Trade Center attack indicate that he has irretrievably passed over to the extreme right. His permanent and final political identity, which was always the essential one, has now solidified.”

Duss’ article adopts the heart of Hitchens’ argument and launches an attack on those on “the left” who oppose or even express hesitancy over the Biden administration’s reckless provocations against Russia in Ukraine.

Duss attacks two groups. He defines his primary target as those who engage in “pernicious authoritarian agitprop” justifying the actions of the “Russian imperium.” This group includes not only open supporters of the reactionary Putin government, but those who oppose the Russian invasion (as does the WSWS) and question the veracity of US imperialist claims of Russian atrocities. Duss calls such groups and individuals “atrocity-denying grifters and click-baiting provocateurs.” Their aim, he says, is “to divide the left” by making opposition to imperialist war a fundamental issue of political principle. He urges what he calls the “genuine anti-war” left to place such opponents of war beyond the pale, and to “not waste time” with them.

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Duss's second target is sections of the membership of the Democratic Socialists of America who have supported the war against Russia with insufficient bellicosity. "Solidarity" with the Ukrainian military, he writes, "has been hard to find in some of the statements from the Democratic Socialists of America."

The fact that the DSA's entire congressional slate supported the war is not enough. Duss attacks the DSA for publishing statements that also raise criticism of NATO expansion in Eastern Europe.

He writes, "Hard questions need to be asked, especially now, about the goals and interests NATO actually serves. *But* we also need to ask hard questions about how our struggle against militarism works alongside our commitment to *colleagues* around the world who require *more than just a call to stop the war*" (emphasis added). Duss does not explain how a struggle "against militarism" is compatible with sending weapons from the world's dominant imperialist power to Ukraine, nor does he say how arming neo-Nazi militias in the Ukrainian military is an act of socialist "solidarity." For an anti-war movement to be "genuine," Duss concludes, it must support imperialist war.

Like Hitchens, Duss argues that "the left" must suppress its criticism of US imperialism and support its war aims. For all its faults, Duss writes, supporting American imperialism is the only way to uphold the "values of social justice, human security and equality, and democracy."

"Our political class advocates military violence with a regularly and ease that is psychopathic," Duss writes. "We should not, however, let all of this absurdity blind us to the instances when provision of military aid can advance a more just and humanitarian global order. Assisting Ukraine's defense against Russian invasion is such an instance."

The article is structured with a series of similar "buts" and "howevers."

"The endless military interventions of the last 20 years have engendered a hard won-skepticism" to imperialist war, Duss writes, "*But* we should also recognize that the Biden administration is not the Bush administration." Yes, the Biden administration "has failed to uphold progressive principles," Duss says, "*But* Ukraine is an area where I think the administration is getting it mostly right." The US has been involved in a permanent series of wars, Duss acknowledges. "I get that sentiment. *But* I think we should interrogate it."

He goes on: the US government has engaged in nonstop "hypocrisy" and the "US and its allies have undermined the order they themselves built …*But* preventing powerful countries from invading and obliterating weaker ones should be a core principle of any such order, and past hypocrisy shouldn't serve as an excuse for failing to say that clearly, and act on it." And "yes, it is maddening to see calls for accountability for Putin's atrocities from the same people who endorsed, defended and continue to oppose any meaningful accountability" for the war in Iraq, "*But* suggesting that Bush's impunity is a reason not to hold Putin accountable is asking Ukrainians to join Iraqis in footing the bill for our corruption."

Duss cannot explain how it is that American imperialism, dripping with blood from decades of permanent war for plunder, in which it carried out horrific war crimes with impunity, is capable of advancing the "values of social justice, human security and equality, and democracy," especially when its shock troops in Ukraine consist of fascist forces who idolize Nazis and the Holocaust. To Duss, it is as though the actions of American imperialism over the last 30 years (let alone the last 125 years) have no bearing on the essential character of the US wars and no connection to its aims in Ukraine.

Duss's claim that the US war against Russia in Ukraine is for "social justice" and "equality" is lying war propaganda. Every imperialist war the US has ever waged has been justified by the claim it is fought for "democracy" and "freedom." After all, the Bush administration justified the criminal invasion of Iraq on the same grounds that Duss now seeks to justify "left" support for a war that poses the risk of nuclear catastrophe.

Duss' endorsement of Christopher Hitchens' pro-war screed is a landmark in the right-wing transformation not only of an individual, but of the affluent pseudo-socialist layer for whom he speaks.

Social being determines social consciousness, and over the course of the past two decades, the growth of social inequality and the financialization of the world economy have driven the affluent upper-middle class to the political right. The social layer from which groups like the Greens, DSA and other pro-war, pseudo-left tendencies draw support have a vested financial interest in the success of American imperialism.

In the 20 years since the Bush administration launched the War on Terror, the share of national wealth possessed by the "next 9" percentile (i.e., those below the top 1 percent but still in the top 10 percent) has risen from 34.8 percent to 38.6 percent. This section of the population possesses a total of $53.3 *trillion* in wealth, up from $14.7 trillion in 2000. An individual in the 10th richest income percentile now makes 12.5 times more than an individual in the 90th percentile, up from 10.6 times in 2000. The wealth and income of the top 10 percent is more closely intertwined with the health of the stock markets than ever before. The richest 10 percent now own 89 percent of all stocks, up from 77 percent in 2000.

It is no wonder that the individuals and political tendencies rooted in this social layer advocate giving imperialist war a chance.

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