

AVOIDING PERMANENT WAR



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The ownership of Iraq's assets will not be returned to Iraqis. Oil revenues will first repay America for costs of a war that would seize Iraqi oil reserves. Reconstruction will pay global corporations to rebuild the structures they helped to destroy. These too will be held by trans-national companies rather than Iraqi national institutions.

Despite what the press headlines would tell you, the war on Iraq continues. Clashes in Iraq are now running at 87 a day, their highest levels since the war officially ended. And yet, even before the blood had dried on the streets after the latest military pursuit of 'rebel elements' the gaze of the Bush administration drifts towards the next conflict zone.

The world has to brace itself for a second-term Bush administration. We have to understand that this is not a judgment on all Americans. It is, however, the poisonous offspring of two powerful forces—the greedy cynicism of corporate America and the complex insecurities that leave large swathes of America in the grip of religious fundamentalism, at least as powerful as any you would find in the Middle East. Bush will feed the hunger of both these forces on a diet of permanent wars. It is for the rest of us to prevent him.

The need for permanent war

Historically, wars have invariably been about poverty of domination, or both. Only rarely have wars been fought over democracy. These have usually been liberation struggles to end a period of dictatorship or occupation. Today's wars are entirely about domination. They are also part of a hidden war, in industrial societies, against democracy itself.

For all their shortcomings, democratic societies have sought to narrow the gap between rich and poor. Economic processes of wealth redistribution underpinned social processes that built up links of solidarity and inclusion. Capitalism made these concessions to 20th century democracies because it feared the alternative would be revolutions that would socialise the ownership of wealth. The collapse of the Soviet Union allowed the mad men of the markets to abandon this concession. The ayatollahs of free trade took over, but with some new rules of their own.

The nature of capital has changed. It is no longer national in character. Ownership of land and production has moved offshore. Physical capital has been displaced by the power of finance capital. And capitalists are overwhelmingly corporate rather than individual. In a world of competitive over

production (itself rapidly being overtaken by the climate consequences that over-production has brought) meaningful democracy gets in the way.

Permanent wars are needed to pillage other people's resources and maintain exploitation conditions that sustain corporate profits. They are also needed to condition domestic populations in the West to accept a steady erosion of their conditions at home as well as abroad. The process is entirely about meeting corporate rather than democratic needs. This is the heart of the Bush agenda.

America Today

There is much that the anti war movement has to take on in solidarity with the American people. To date, American taxpayers have spent \$150 billion on the war in Iraq. Less than 20% of this could have delivered health insurance cover for the 40 million Americans who have none.

An even smaller amount could have ended the hardship facing 1 in 8 Americans who live below the poverty line; or raised the minimum wage from the \$5.15 an hour it was set to 7 years ago.

Over 33 million Americans are officially recognised as being 'food insecure'. At the same time, the country generates huge food surpluses that it insists on dumping on poor countries (at subsidized prices that destroy the home countries food base) Why? Because out of the \$100 billion of US agriculture subsidies, almost half of the money goes to the 8% of corporate farmers who export subsidized goods. Over 60% of US farmers get no subsidy at all. Many of these now live on farm incomes that are back at the level of depression-era pay.

The Michael Moore film Fahrenheit 9/11 brilliantly captured the chasm that divides America. It was the clip of Bush addressing a banquet of rich Americans. Without a hint of embarrassment or discomfort Bush tells them "Some people call you the elite. I call you my base". This is his understanding of modern democracy....ruling in the interests of the rich. And if the poor are likely to object, let them live in fear. The terrorist threat, the ubiquitous enemy, the everlasting war...are all mechanisms for supporting an elite that is medieval in its presumptions but corporate in its character.

Corporate Feudalism

The easy, undamaged relationships between the Bush family and the Bin Ladens graphically illustrate how wars can be conducted without interrupting the flow of wealth to the wealthy. It may be hell in Fulljah (or Flint, Michigan) but the overlapping empires of oil, armaments and military security services all know the fortunes that can come from wars. The warfare state is the new welfare state. Its services will be lavishly funded from taxation when universal public services (we are told) are unaffordable.

Power brokers make their money not out of asset seizures (oil, water, minerals, energy generation) but also out of post war reconstruction contracts. For non military corporations, the gains come through the demonstration that military power will be used to protect company acquisition of natural/national resources. US taxation has already been skewed in favor of the rich under the Bush administration. The size of the US economy has doubled in the last decade but the wealth held by Americas 400 richest

people has gone up tenfold. One percent of the population owns 40% of all US assets. And corporate CEO's receive an hourly wage 419 times greater than the average production worker.

Yet in the face of this, low paid Americans are being told they must work harder and longer. McJobs are far more common than real ones. In 48 out of 50 states, job change statistics since the end of the recession in 2001 show that high paying jobs are being replaced by low paying ones. On average, those going from 'in-work' to 'out-of-work' to 'back-to-work' do so with a 21% drop in pay. For me the most saddening statistic however was a work-life one. By the age of 6 the average American child would have watched more television than they will have spent in conversation with their father in the whole of their lifetime.

These figures are not distractions from the war agenda, but central to it. The WTO agenda now forces the pace of accelerating exploitation. It sustains company profits and shareholder dividends. Everyone is told to work harder, expect less, and presume no natural rights to use their indigenous resources to meet their own needs first. As in feudal times, military force, military force is the enforcement mechanism for exploitation. As in feudal times, too, it will be the social movements of the day that challenge wealth divides that disfigure their lives. This is an important part of today's growing anti-war movement; a part that refuses to fight wars for the rich in order to further marginalize the poor.

The immediate challenges

In practical terms, everything in the short term has to begin from the occupation of Iraq. There will be no early end to the occupation. Internal conflict will continue to tie up the 135,000 US troops stationed there and slow (but not halt) progress towards the next war.

For the anti-war movement, solidarity action must include the following:-

- **Demanding that occupying forces come within international law and answerable to the international courts.**
- **Forcing the UN to address the legality of pre-emptive wars**
- **Pressing for the early removal of occupying armies and**
- **Insisting that reconstruction payments to Iraq are at least equal to the military spending that has destroyed it.**

Beyond this, however, we must also look more imaginatively at ways in which we tackle both the causes of war and the means of fighting them.

Little attention has been given to the fact that large parts of the US military budget for Iraq came from the issuing of US government bonds. These bonds were bought by national governments around the world (and by the managers of workers' pension funds). An active global campaign to disinvest in US-dollar bonds when war drums threaten would force US presidents to go back to their own people, seeking not only a mandate for war but for the direct tax rises that would have to pay the cost. The international community must insist that those who oppose adventurist wars should not end up as the ones who inadvertently finance them.

At least some proportion of the Americans who vote for Bush may have some sympathy for these

arguments, but feel that 'the terrorist threat' leaves them with no choice other than to vote for a tough military stance. Their fears are ones that the anti-war movement has to engage with too.

No one is born a terrorist. They grow in fields of despair and injustice. They are recruited within the wastelands in which brutality reigns and hope has been abandoned. Those who point to the educated backgrounds of the 9/11 bombers ignore the fact that their indoctrination drew on long histories of injustice in the Middle East and the exploitation of the poor under today's global trade rules. Nothing ultimately escapes Martin Luther King's observation that 'peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of justice'.

If the anti-war movement genuinely wants to shape the 21st century, this too is what we must address. The avoidance of war will be found, not down the threatening barrel of a gun, but in a justice agenda in which people find hope.

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