

WHY IS THE U.S. IN IRAQ?

Panel presentation by **Cliff DuRand**, March 21, 2007

It is now generally recognized that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq is an unmitigated disaster – some say the biggest foreign policy mistake in U.S. history, meaning it even surpasses the U.S. war on Vietnam. At the same time it has helped to lay bare the reality of U.S. imperialism. But lest we think of that as an aberration peculiar to the Neo-cons running the Bush presidency, I want to argue that there are basic continuities between the Non-con view of the role of the U.S. in the world and the Liberal view that has characterized the foreign policy establishment since at least WWII and certainly for the last quarter century. Let me begin by characterizing the Neo-con and Liberal views in the present era of corporate globalization and where they differ.

The Liberal version of corporate globalization promotes neo-liberal economic policies -- free trade, hyper-mobility of capital, privatization, rollback of social programs, and withdrawal of the state from the market, except where corporations need governmental support, etc. In the area of foreign policy, Liberals favor multilateral agreements between states under U.S. leadership, including the establishment of transnational institutions of governance to regulate inter-state relations, e.g. WTO.

Trade relations are to be rule governed, disputes to be resolved by panels of experts, and enforcement is to be by states on each other under WTO sanction.

The Neo-con version of corporate globalization starts from the same economic principles of neo-liberalism. But they are much more protective of U.S. sovereignty and more willing to use coercive state power. This leads to a unilateralist, military interventionism in pursuit of corporate and state interests. It is in these terms that I think we need to think about the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In sum, to adapt a phrase from Neo-con theoretician Robert Kagan, Liberals are from Venus and Neo-cons are from Mars. [Cf. *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, Alfred Knopf, 2003] Or, as I like to put it, Neo-cons are economic neo-liberals on steroids. Liberals seek a Kantian world of perpetual peace based on consensual compliance. Neo-cons, on the other hand live in a Hobbesian world of competition and conflict between self-interested actors where it is the strong who prevail. Accordingly, Neo-cons see global order as requiring a world policeman, a modern Leviathan who has dominant power in the world, making it unnecessary that individual states have significant military capabilities of their own since their legitimate interests will be protected by the prevailing superpower. And, of course, the U.S. has selected itself for this awesome responsibility.

The Neo-cons saw the end of the Cold War as a unique opportunity for the U.S. to establish itself as the first globally dominant power in history. They were critical of President George Bush The Elder for not unseating Saddam Hussein and seizing the historic opportunity to capitalize on the resulting U.S. geopolitical control of the Middle East to achieve global dominance. It is this that led them to develop the strategic principles of their Project for the New American Century. More on that in a moment.

By contrast, Liberals seek to maintain global order through consensual compliance rather than through coercive domination. In this order the U.S. may be “first among equals”, in the words of Madeline Albright, President Clinton’s Secretary of State, but it is first only because its leadership is accepted as legitimate by others. Thus it is hegemonic because its authority is accepted as legitimate rather than because it is powerful. That does not mean that a hegemon lacks coercive power or never uses it. In fact the U.S. Liberal foreign policy establishment has used force unilaterally on many occasions. But it has usually done so under cover of some kind of international sanction, e.g. a resolution of the U.N. Security Council or regional bodies like the OAS and sought to legitimate it by appeals to the common interest of the “free world.” Anti-communism provided a handy all-purpose ideology for this. And when it knew it could not obtain multilateral consent for an intervention, it acted covertly. It is almost

quaint now to look back at the US sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and see the great concern of the Kennedy administration for concealing the US hand in it. Whether overtly or covertly, the US has a long history of interventions, with or without the consent of other states important to it. The Bush administration is just much more blatant about it; it's in-your-face interventionism. This more aggressive militarism has been made possible by the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar world. The Neo-cons no longer find it necessary to compete to win the hearts and minds of the people, and so imperialism can remove the velvet glove.

The importance of the present debacle in Iraq is that it shows how profoundly the Neo-cons have misunderstood the nature of power. Even in a Hobbesian world, U.S. power lies not only in the missiles and helicopters with which it can kill, but in the willing compliance of others with it, based on acceptance of its authority. Without that, no enduring order is possible; without justice, there can be no peace. Rule by fear breeds resistance. That's why Neo-con hawks have had to rename the "War on Terror" as "The Long War". Ted Koppel calls it "Our Children's Children's War".

In spite of the important differences between Neo-cons and Liberals, we should also recognize some fundamental principles that they share. I have mentioned that they share the corporate friendly neo-liberal economic policies that have guided globalization thus far. While they differ on how to bring all peoples into a globalized world and what it will take to maintain such an order, they share the same modernizing objective. And although it is seldom admitted, they also both accept the growing inequality between the rich and the poor that results. That this does not bother the Neo-cons should surprise no one. But the Liberal foreign policy establishment has accepted that not only as a result of U.S. policy, but as one of its fundamental objectives. This can be seen in State Department documents at least as early as 1948 in the wake of World War II when George Kennan, Director of Policy Planning of the US Department of State, wrote as follows:

"We have 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population.... In this situation we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will allow us to maintain this position of disparity." [Department of State, Policy Planning Study (PPS) 23 *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), 1948, vol. 1 (part 2), February 24, 1948, p. 23.]

The United States undertook this challenge, however, not solely on its own behalf, but also on behalf of the European colonial powers now weakened by war. As the only capitalist power whose industrial base had been untouched by the conflict, only the US was in a position to exercise such leadership. But it was understood that to avoid a return to fratricidal interimperialist rivalries, this leadership must represent the interests of capitalist nations as a whole –a general rather than a particular interest. It was this that made recognition of US leadership possible. It was this that made US hegemony possible. Other core capitalist states accepted US dominance in the post-war alliance in a kind of 'collective imperialism' over the South. [to borrow a term from Samir Amin, "The Alternative to the Neoliberal System of Globalization and Militarism: Imperialism Today and the Hegemonic Offensive of the United States" February 25, 2003]

Even with a benign imperialism it was recognized that hegemony had to be backed up by coercion or the threat of coercive force. As Antonio Gramsci put it, hegemony is consensus protected by the 'armor of coercion.' US policy-makers understood this well. Even though the US had undergone a welcome military demobilization after the war, they soon mounted a major military buildup. The strategic thinking behind this was contained in the top secret 1950 National Security Council Memorandum number 68. NSC-68, as it is called, was the blueprint for the Cold War that was to dominate international relations for the next four decades. Drafted by a team headed by Paul Nitze, it called for "a rapid buildup of political, economic, and military strength" around the world. NSC-68 proclaimed two objectives for this buildup: to foster "a world environment in which the American system can

survive and flourish” and the “containment of the Soviet Union.” Tellingly it admitted that “even if there were no Soviet Union we would face the great problem” of achieving “order and security” for US global interests. [National Security Council, Memorandum NSC-68 (April 7, 1950). *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), 1950, vol. 1, pp. 252, 263, 272.] What this signifies is that, in the words of William I. Robinson, the objective of US foreign policy “was the defense of a budding post-colonial international capitalism under US domination.” [*Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 15.] This suggests that the Cold War was not just an East-West conflict, but a North-South conflict.

Probably the most striking thing about US foreign policy since January 2001 is the blatantly nationalistic character it has taken on. This even preceded 911 with the abrogation of the Kyoto Treaty, green lighting the Star Wars missile defense system, maneuvering to maintain US dominance in an expanded NATO, withdrawal from the International Court of Criminal Justice, etc. Then in September 2002 came a new National Security Strategy proclaiming principles of pre-emptive war, unilateralism, and interventionism. Gone was the familiar emphasis on US leadership in the community of nations to ensure stability. In its place we found the goal of maintaining US military dominance worldwide. This was not the language of a hegemon that sought or needed the consent of other nations, but that of an imperial power claiming dominance over others. It was the spirit of a superpower that did not need legitimacy because it was confident it could prevail due to its overwhelming military might. This shift has far reaching implications, as we are learning to our peril.

The doctrine of pre-emption is also nationalistic, not only because it is exercised unilaterally, but also because, most expansively, its purpose is to prevent the rise of any other power to a position where it might be able to challenge the US. It’s not just a threat to act against a power that is a “clear and present danger,” it is a threat to act now against any possible future challenger. The aim is no longer the Cold War “balance of power” concept; it is to achieve a permanent imbalance of power. As the US emerged from the Cold War as the sole surviving superpower, the neo-cons saw a unique historical opportunity to secure US dominance globally “well into the next century,” as their Project for a New American Century put it.

It is this that undergirds the Neo-cons decision to invade Iraq under the cover of a supposed “War on Terror.” In doing so they see the U.S. as acting on behalf of the legitimate interests of other advanced industrial nations that depend on Middle East oil even more so than the U.S. does. If the U.S. can guarantee the flow of oil to Europe and Japan, then they will not need to challenge U.S. leadership by aspiring to a greater role themselves in the global or even regional geopolitical order. This objective was made explicit in the 1992 *Defense Planning Guidance* drafter by Paul Wolfowitz under then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney – a doctrine that is at the heart of the 2002 *National Security Strategy*. In it the U.S. undertakes to protect not only its own interests, but also those of its friends and allies and ultimately what it sees as the universal interests of all peoples in a system of free enterprise. This is the language of “world leadership” from the Cold War era that has become so familiar to our ears that we can easily overlook its imperial character.

Some Neo-cons have even argued that the U.S. be re-conceived “from a traditional nation-state to an imperial power.” That was the view expressed by Richard Haass, director of policy planning in Colin Powell’s State Department in a November 11, 2000 speech. [cited by John Bellamy Foster, “The New Geopolitics of Empire”, *Monthly Review* 57,8 (January 2006), p. 12.] The implications of this for our nation-state have been spelled out by Chalmers Johnson in his books *The Sorrows of Empire* and his more recent *Nemesis*.

But global dominance is just an extension into the post Cold War situation of objectives long embraced by Cold War Liberals themselves. As Ellen Meisks Wood has observed, “there is nothing new in the Bush team’s conviction that the principle objective of US foreign policy is to establish hegemony over

a global system of more or less sovereign states, and that massive military superiority lies at the core of that project.” [Empire of Capital, p. 161] Even the Neo-con doctrine of preemptive war can be seen as an extension of the doctrine of massive retaliation since under it the U.S. refused to renounce a possible first strike.

To see that a global geopolitical empire is not anathema to Cold War Liberals, we need only look to Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s national security adviser. In his 1997 book *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Brzezinski embraced the Neo-con’s imperial ambitions by advocating a permanent “global supremacy” for the U.S., making it “the first and only truly global power.” He has just now published a new book, *Second Chance*, in which he puts forth the same vision, criticizing the Bush administration only for the incompetent way it has sought to realize this imperial project.

So where does this leave us? The Neo-con’s imperial project is now in tatters. But if you accept my central claim that it is just a continuation into the present unipolar world of Cold War Liberalism, then the vision they share of the U.S. role in the world is also discredited. We have to question the view that the U.S. has the responsibility to remake the world in its own image by promoting its ideas of democracy and free enterprise, i.e. countries ruled by elites friendly to the U.S. in which transnational corporations rule supreme. We don’t have enough blood or treasure to impose that on the rest of the world. That should be the fundamental lesson the American people take away from the debacle in Iraq. If we don’t learn that lesson, the already seriously damaged American republic and the American people themselves may go the way of Rome. We deserve better than that.