Naked Imperialism

By John Bellamy Foster
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This is the introduction to John Bellamy Foster's *Naked Imperialism: America's Pursuit of Global Dominance*, to be published by Monthly Review Press in February 2006. A different version of this essay was published earlier this year as the introduction to a Turkish language edition of his writings on imperialism, entitled Rediscovering Imperialism.

The global actions of the United States since September 11, 2001, are often seen as constituting a "new militarism" and a "new imperialism." Yet, neither militarism nor imperialism is new to the United States, which has been an expansionist power—continental, hemispheric, and global—since its inception. What has changed is the nakedness with which this is being promoted, and the unlimited, planetary extent of U.S. ambitions.

Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, insists that the "greatest danger" facing the United States in Iraq and around the world "is that we won't use all of our power for fear of the 'I' word—imperialism….Given the historical baggage that 'imperialism' carries, there's no need for the U.S. government to embrace the term. But it should definitely embrace the practice." The United States, he says, should be "prepared to embrace its imperial rule unapologetically." If Washington is not planning on "permanent bases in Iraq…they should be….If that raises hackles about American imperialism, so be it" ("American Imperialism?: No Need to Run from the Label," *USA Today*, May 6, 2003). Similarly, Deepak Lal, James S. Coleman Professor of International Development Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, states: "The primary task of a Pax Americana must be to find ways to create a new order in the Middle East….It is accusingly said by many that any such rearrangement of the status quo would be an act of imperialism and would largely be motivated by the desire to control Middle Eastern oil. But far from being objectionable, imperialism is precisely what is needed to restore order in the Middle East" ("In Defense of Empires," in Andrew Bacevich, ed., *The Imperial Tense*, 2003).

These views, although emanating from neoconservatives, are fully within the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, there is little dissent in U.S. ruling

circles about current attempts to expand the American Empire. For Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, senior fellows at the Brookings Institution, "the real debate…is not whether to have an empire, but what kind" (*New York Times*, May 10, 2003). Michael Ignatieff, director of Harvard University's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, states unequivocally: "This new imperialism…is humanitarian in theory but imperial in practice; it creates 'subsovereignty,' in which states possess independence in theory but not in fact. The reason the Americans are in Afghanistan, or the Balkans, after all, is to maintain imperial order in zones essential to the interest of the United States. They are there to maintain order against a barbarian threat." As "the West's last military state" and its last "remaining empire," the United States has a responsibility for "imperial structuring and ordering" in "analogy to Rome….We have now awakened to the barbarians….Retribution has been visited on the barbarians, and more will follow" ("The Challenges of American Imperial Power," *Naval War College Review*, Spring 2003).

All of this reflects the realities of U.S. imperial power. In his preamble to the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, released in fall 2002, President George W. Bush declared that since the fall of the Soviet Union there was now "a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy and free enterprise," as embodied concretely in U.S. capitalism. Any society that rejected the guidance of that model was destined to fail—and would, it was implied, be declared a security threat to the United States. The main body of the document that followed was an open declaration of Washington's goal of strategic dominance over the entire planet for the indefinite future. It announced U.S. intentions of waging "preemptive" (or preventive) war against nations that threatened or in the future could conceivably threaten U.S. dominance directly—or that might be considered a threat indirectly through dangers they posed to U.S. friends or allies anywhere on the globe. Preventive actions would be taken, the new *National Security Strategy* emphasized, to ensure that no power would be allowed to rise up to rival the United States in military capabilities anytime in the future. On April 13, 2004, President Bush proclaimed that the United States needed to "go on the offensive and stay on the offensive," waging an unrelenting war against all those it considered its enemies.

Since September 11, 2001, the United States has waged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, expanded the global reach of its military base system, and increased the level of its military spending to the point that it now spends about as much on the military as all other nations of the world combined. Glorying in

the U.S. blitzkrieg in Iraq, journalist Greg Easterbrook proclaimed in the *New York Times* (April 27, 2003) that U.S. military forces are "the strongest the world has ever known…stronger than the Wehrmacht in 1940, stronger than the legions at the height of Roman power."

Numerous critics on the U.S. left have responded by declaring, in effect, "Let's throw the bastards out." The U.S. government under the Bush administration, so the argument goes, has been taken over by a neoconservative cabal that has imposed a new policy of militarism and imperialism. For example, University of California at Los Angeles sociologist Michael Mann argues at the end of his *Incoherent Empire* (2003) that "a neoconservative chicken-hawk coup…seized the White House and the Department of Defense" with George W. Bush's rise to the presidency. For Mann the end solution is simply to "throw the militarists out of office."

The argument advanced here points to a different conclusion. U.S. militarism and imperialism have deep roots in U.S. history and the political-economic logic of capitalism. As even supporters of U.S. imperialism are now willing to admit, the United States has been an empire from its inception. "The United States," Boot writes in "American Imperialism?," "has been an empire since at least 1803, when Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory. Throughout the 19th century, what Jefferson called the 'empire of liberty' expanded across the continent." Later the United States conquered and colonized lands overseas in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the brutal Philippine-American War that immediately followed—justified as an attempt to exercise the "white man's burden." After the Second World War the United States and other major imperialist states relinquished their formal political empires, but retained informal economic empires backed up by the threat and not infrequently the reality of military intervention. The Cold War obscured this neocolonial reality but never entirely hid it.

The growth of empire is neither peculiar to the United States nor a mere outgrowth of the policies of particular states. It is the systematic result of the entire history and logic of capitalism. Since its birth in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries capitalism has been a globally expansive system—one that is hierarchically divided between metropole and satellite, center and periphery. The objective of the imperialist system of today as in the past is to open up peripheral economies to investment from the core capitalist countries, thus ensuring both a continual supply of raw materials at low prices, and a net outflow of economic surplus from periphery to center of the world system. In addition, the third world is viewed as a source of cheap

labor, constituting a global reserve army of labor. Economies of the periphery are structured to meet the external needs of the United States and the other core capitalist countries rather than their own internal needs. This has resulted (with a few notable exceptions) in conditions of unending dependency and debt peonage in the poorer regions of the world.

If the "new militarism" and the "new imperialism" are not so new after all, but in line with the entire history of U.S. and world capitalism, the crucial question then becomes: Why has U.S. imperialism become more naked in recent years to the point that it has suddenly been rediscovered by proponents and opponents alike? Only a few years ago some theorists of globalization with roots in the left, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book *Empire* (2000), were arguing that the age of imperialism was over, that the Vietnam War was the last imperialist war. Yet, today, imperialism is more openly embraced by the U.S. power structure than at any time since the 1890s. This shift can only be understood by examining the historical changes that have occurred in the last three decades since the end of the Vietnam War.

When the Vietnam War finally ended in 1975 the United States had suffered a major defeat in what, Cold War ideology notwithstanding, was clearly an imperialist war. The defeat coincided with a sudden slowdown in the rate of growth of the U.S. and world capitalist economy in the early 1970s, as the system's old nemesis of secular stagnation reappeared. The vast export of dollars abroad associated with the war and the growth of empire created a huge Eurodollar market, which played a central role in President Richard Nixon's decision to de-link the dollar from gold in August 1971, ending the dollar-gold standard. This marked the decline of U.S. economic hegemony. The energy crisis that hit the United States and other leading industrial states when the Persian Gulf countries cut their oil exports in response to Western support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 exposed U.S. vulnerability due to its dependence on foreign oil.

What conservatives labeled the "Vietnam Syndrome"—or the reluctance of the American population to support U.S. military interventions in third world countries—prevented the United States in this period from responding to the world crisis by setting its gargantuan military machine in motion. U.S. interventions were consequently reduced and breakaways from the imperialist system spread rapidly: Ethiopia in 1974, Portugal's African colonies (Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau) in 1974–75, Grenada in 1979, Nicaragua in 1979, Iran in 1979, and Zimbabwe in 1980.

The most serious defeat experienced by U.S. imperialism in the late 1970s was the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that overthrew the Shah of Iran, who had been a lynchpin of U.S. military dominance over the Persian Gulf and its oil. Coming in the wake of the energy crisis, the Middle East became an overriding concern of U.S. global strategy. President Jimmy Carter issued in January 1980 what came to be known as the Carter Doctrine: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." This was worded so as to parallel the Monroe Doctrine, which had established U.S. claims to dominance over the Americas, and had been employed as a putative "legal principle" with which to justify U.S. military invasions of other states in the hemisphere. The Carter Doctrine said, in effect, that the United States claimed military dominance of the Persian Gulf, which was to be brought fully within the American empire "by any means necessary." This assertion of U.S. power in the Middle East was accompanied by the onset of the CIA-sponsored war against Soviet troops in Afghanistan (the largest covert war in history), in which the United States enlisted fundamentalist Islamic forces including Osama Bin Laden in a holy war or jihad against Soviet occupying forces. The blowback from this war and the subsequent Gulf War was to lead directly to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

During the Reagan era in the 1980s the United States expanded its offensive, renewing the Cold War arms race while at the same time seeking to overturn the revolutions of the 1970s. In addition to prosecuting the covert war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, it provided military and economic assistance to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, supporting it in the Iraq-Iran War of 1980–1988; increased its direct military involvement in the Middle East, intervening unsuccessfully in Lebanon in the early 1980s (withdrawing only after the devastating 1983 bombing of the marine barracks); and sponsored covert operations designed to overcome unfriendly states and revolutionary movements throughout the globe. Major covert wars were instigated against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and against revolutionary forces in Guatemala and El Salvador. In 1983 the United States invaded the tiny island of Grenada, and under Reagan's successor, President George H. W. Bush, it invaded Panama in December 1989 as part of a campaign to reassert control over Central America.

But it was the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 that represented the real sea change for U.S. imperialism. As Andrew Bacevich wrote in *American*

Empire (2002), "just as victory in 1898 [in the Spanish-American War] transformed the Caribbean into an American lake, so too victory [in the Cold War] in 1989 brought the entire globe within the purview of the United States; henceforth American interests knew no bounds" (177). Suddenly, with the Soviet Union withdrawing from the world stage (soon to collapse itself in the summer of 1991), the possibility of a full-scale U.S. military intervention in the Middle East was opened up. This occurred almost immediately with the Gulf War, commencing in the spring of 1991. The United States, although aware in advance of the impending Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, did not strongly oppose it until after it had taken place (see the transcript of Saddam Hussein's statement and U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie's response, *New York Times International*, September 23, 1990). The Iraqi invasion offered the United States a pretext for a full-scale war in the Middle East. Between 100,000 and 200,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed in the Gulf War and at least 15,000 Iraqi civilians died directly from U.S. and British bombing of Iraq (Research Unit for Political Economy, *Behind the Invasion of Iraq*, 2003). Commenting on what he believed to be one of the chief gains of the war, President Bush declared in April 1991, "By God, we've licked the Vietnam Syndrome."

Nevertheless, the United States at the time chose not to pursue its advantage and invade and occupy Iraq. Although there were undoubtedly numerous reasons for that decision, including the fact that it would probably not have been supported by the Arab members of the Gulf War coalition, the primary one was the geopolitical shift resulting from the collapse of the Soviet bloc. By then the Soviet Union itself was tottering. Uncertainty about the future of the Soviet Union and the geopolitical sphere it had controlled was such that Washington could not then afford the commitment of troops that a continuing occupation of Iraq would have entailed. The end of the Soviet Union came only months later.

During the remainder of the 1990s the United States (chiefly under Democratic President Bill Clinton) was to engage in major military interventions in the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe. This culminated in 1999 with the war in Yugoslavia (Kosovo) in which the United States, leading NATO, bombed for eleven weeks, followed by the insertion of NATO ground troops. Purportedly carried out to stop "ethnic cleansing," the war in the Balkans was geopolitically about the extension of U.S. imperial power into an area formerly within the Soviet sphere of influence.

Already by the close of the twentieth century the power elite in the United States had therefore moved toward a policy of naked imperialism to a degree not seen since the opening years of the century—with the U.S. empire now conceived as planetary in scope. Even as a massive antiglobalization movement was emerging, notably with the protests in Seattle in November 1999, the U.S. establishment was moving energetically toward an imperialism for the twenty-first century; one that would promote neoliberal globalization, while resting on U.S. world dominance. "The hidden hand of the market," Thomas Friedman, the Pulitzer-prize-winning foreign policy columnist for the *New York Times*, opined, "will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald's cannot flourish without a McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps" (*New York Times Magazine*, March 28, 1999). The "hidden fist," however, was only partly hidden, and was to become even less so in the ensuing years.

To be sure, the shift toward a more openly militaristic imperialism occurred only gradually, in stages. For most of the 1990s the U.S. ruling class and national security establishment had waged a debate behind the scenes on what to do now that the Soviet Union's disappearance had left the United States as the sole superpower. Naturally, there was never any doubt about what was to be the main economic thrust of the global empire ruled over by the United States. The 1990s saw the strengthening of neoliberal globalization: the removal of barriers to capital throughout the world in ways that directly enhanced the power of the rich capitalist countries of the center of the world economy vis-à-vis the poor countries of the periphery. A key development was the introduction of the World Trade Organization to accompany the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as organizations enforcing the monopoly capitalist rules of the game. From the standpoint of most of the world, a more exploitative economic imperialism had raised its ugly head. Yet for the powers that be at the center of the world economy neoliberal globalization was regarded as a resounding success—notwithstanding signs of global financial instability as revealed by the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98.

U.S. ruling circles continued to debate, however, the manner and extent to which the United States should push its ultimate advantage—using its vast military power as a means of promoting U.S. global supremacy in the new "unipolar" world. If neoliberalism had arisen in response to economic stagnation, transferring the costs of economic crisis to the world's poor, the

problem of declining U.S. economic hegemony seemed to require an altogether different response: the reassertion of U.S. power as military colossus of the world system.

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union the Defense Department under the administration of George H.W. Bush initiated a reconsideration of U.S. national security policy in light of the changing global situation. The report, completed in March 1992 and known as the *Defense Planning Guidance*, was written under the supervision of Paul Wolfowitz, then undersecretary of policy in the Defense Department. It indicated that the chief national-security goal of the United States must be one of "precluding the emergence of any potential global competitor" (*New York Times*, March 8, 1992). The ensuing debate within the U.S. establishment over the 1990s focused less on whether the United States was to seek global primacy than whether it should adopt a more multilateral ("sheriff and posse," as Richard Haass dubbed it) or unilateral approach. Some of the dominant actors in what was to become the administration of George W. Bush, including Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, were to organize the Project for the New American Century, which in anticipation of Bush winning the White House, issued, at then vice-presidential candidate Dick Cheney's request, a foreign policy paper, entitled *Rebuilding America's Defenses*(September 2000), reaffirming the unilateral and nakedly aggressive strategy of the *Defense Planning Guidance* of 1992. Following September 11, 2001, this approach became official U.S. policy in *The National Security Strategy of the United States* of 2002. The beating of the war drums for an invasion of Iraq coincided with the release of this new declaration on national security—effectively a declaration of a new world war.

It is common, as we have noted, for critics to attribute these dramatic changes simply to the seizure of the political and military command centers of the U.S. state by a neoconservative cabal (brought into power by the disputed 2000 election), which, when combined with the added opportunity provided by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led to a global imperial offensive and a new militarism. Yet, the expansion of American empire, in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise was, as the foregoing argument has demonstrated, already well advanced at that time and had been a bipartisan project from the start. Under the Clinton administration the United States waged war in the Balkans, formerly part of the Soviet sphere in Eastern Europe, while also initiating the process of establishing U.S. military bases in Central Asia, formerly part of the Soviet Union itself. Iraq in the late 1990s was being bombed by the United States on a daily basis. When John Kerry as the

Democratic presidential candidate in the 2004 election insisted that he would prosecute the war on Iraq and the war on terrorism if anything with greater determination and military resources—and that he differed only on the degree to which the United States adopted a lone vigilante as opposed to a sheriff and posse stance—he was merely continuing what had been the Democratic stance on empire throughout the 1990s and beyond: an all but naked imperialism.

From the longer view offered by a historical-materialist critique of capitalism, the direction that would be taken by U.S. imperialism following the fall of the Soviet Union was never in doubt. Capitalism by its very logic is a globally expansive system. The contradiction between its transnational economic aspirations and the fact that politically it remains rooted in particular nation states is insurmountable for the system. Yet, ill-fated attempts by individual states to overcome this contradiction are just as much a part of its fundamental logic. In present world circumstances, when one capitalist state has a virtual monopoly of the means of destruction, the temptation for that state to attempt to seize full-spectrum dominance and to transform itself into the de facto global state governing the world economy is irresistible. As the noted Marxian philosopher István Mészáros observed in *Socialism or Barbarism?* (2001)—written, significantly, before George W. Bush became president: "[W]hat is at stake today is not the control of a particular part of the planet—no matter how large—putting at a disadvantage but still tolerating the independent actions of some rivals, but the control of its totality by one hegemonic economic and military superpower, with all means—even the most extreme authoritarian and, if needed, violent military ones—at its disposal."

The unprecedented dangers of this new global disorder are revealed in the twin cataclysms to which the world is heading at present: nuclear proliferation and hence increased chances of the outbreak of nuclear war, and planetary ecological destruction. These are symbolized by the Bush administration's refusal to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to limit nuclear weapons development and by its failure to sign the Kyoto Protocol as a first step in controlling global warming. As former U.S. Secretary of Defense (in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations) Robert McNamara stated in an article entitled "Apocalypse Soon" in the May–June 2005 issue of *Foreign Policy*: "The United States has never endorsed the policy of 'no first use,' not during my seven years as secretary or since. We have been and remain prepared to initiate the use of nuclear weapons—by the decision of one person, the president—against either a nuclear or nonnuclear enemy whenever we believe it is in our interest to do so." The nation with the greatest conventional military force and the willingness to use it unilaterally to enlarge its global power is also the nation with the greatest

nuclear force and the readiness to use it whenever it sees fit—setting the whole world on edge. The nation that contributes more to carbon dioxide emissions leading to global warming than any other (representing approximately a quarter of the world's total) has become the greatest obstacle to addressing global warming and the world's growing environmental problems—raising the possibility of the collapse of civilization itself if present trends continue.

The United States is seeking to exercise sovereign authority over the planet during a time of widening global crisis: economic stagnation, increasing polarization between the global rich and the global poor, weakening U.S. economic hegemony, growing nuclear threats, and deepening ecological decline. The result is a heightening of international instability. Other potential forces are emerging in the world, such as the European Community and China, that could eventually challenge U.S. power, regionally and even globally. Third world revolutions, far from ceasing, are beginning to gain momentum again, symbolized by Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution under Hugo Chávez. U.S. attempts to tighten its imperial grip on the Middle East and its oil have had to cope with a fierce, seemingly unstoppable, Iraqi resistance, generating conditions of imperial overstretch. With the United States brandishing its nuclear arsenal and refusing to support international agreements on the control of such weapons, nuclear proliferation is continuing. New nations, such as North Korea, are entering or can be expected soon to enter the "nuclear club." Terrorist blowback from imperialist wars in the third world is now a well-recognized reality, generating rising fear of further terrorist attacks in New York, London, and elsewhere. Such vast and overlapping historical contradictions, rooted in the combined and uneven development of the global capitalist economy along with the U.S. drive for planetary domination, foreshadow what is potentially the most dangerous period in the history of imperialism.

The course on which U.S and world capitalism is now headed points to global barbarism—or worse. Yet it is important to remember that nothing in the development of human history is inevitable. There still remains an alternative path—the global struggle for a humane, egalitarian, democratic, and sustainable society. The classic name for such a society is "socialism." Such a renewed struggle for a world of substantive human equality must begin by addressing the system's weakest link and at the same time the world's most pressing needs—by organizing a global resistance movement against the new naked imperialism.

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