

# MONTHLY REVIEW

VOL. 57  
NO. 8

JANUARY  
2006

AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

## THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF EMPIRE

John Bellamy Foster

### What Will We Do?

*Occupational Identity and the  
'Knowledge-Based Economy'*

URSULA HUWS

### What Was the Matter with Ohio?

*Unions & Evangelicals in the Rust Belt*

JAMES STRAUB

**Reviews** MARCELLA BENCIVENNI *on* The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism ♦ PETER GILMORE *on* 'Labor Priest' Charles Owen Rice and the Cold War Attack on the United Electrical Workers

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# The New Geopolitics of Empire

By John Bellamy Foster

January 1, 2006

This article is a much expanded version of a plenary address delivered to the Fifth Colloquium of Latin American Political Economists in Mexico City on October 27. Parts of this argument were also presented in talks sponsored by Black Sun Books in Eugene, Oregon on November 16 and at the Stop the War Conference at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles on November 19.

Today's imperial ideology proclaims that the United States is the new city on the hill, the *capital of an empire* dominating the globe. Yet the U.S. global empire, we are nonetheless told, is not an *empire of capital*; it has nothing to do with economic imperialism as classically defined by Marxists and others. The question then arises: How is this new imperial age conceived by those promoting it?

The answer, I am convinced, is to be found in the dramatic resurrection of geopolitics as an imperial philosophy. What Michael Klare has called in these pages "The New Geopolitics" has become a pragmatic means of integrating U.S. imperial goals in the post-Cold War world while avoiding all direct allusions to the "economic taproot of imperialism."

As Franz Neumann indicated in *Behemoth*, his classic 1942 critique of the Third Reich, "geopolitics is nothing but the ideology of imperialist expansion." More precisely, it represents a specific way of organizing and advancing empire—one that arose with modern imperialism, but that contains its own peculiar history that is reverberating once again in our time.

Geopolitics is concerned with how geographical factors, including territory, population, strategic location, and natural resource endowments, as modified by economics and technology, affect the relations between states and the struggle for world domination. Classical geopolitics was a manifestation of interimperialist rivalry and emerged around the time of the Spanish-American War and the Boer War. It constituted the core ideology of U.S. overseas expansion articulated in Alfred Thayer Mahan's *Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Frontier in American History" (1893), and Brooks Adams's *The New Empire* (1902)—as well as in Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough-Rider" policies. The term

“geopolitics” itself was coined in 1899 by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén, after which it quickly emerged as a systematic area of study. The three foremost geopolitical theorists in the key period from the Treaty of Versailles through the Second World War, were Halford Mackinder in Britain, Karl Haushofer in Germany, and Nicholas John Spykman in the United States.

## Classical Geopolitics

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Mackinder was a geographer, economist, and politician. He was Director of the London School of Economics from 1903 to 1908 and a Member of Parliament from Glasgow from 1910 to 1922. He began to develop his geopolitical ideas in 1904 with his essay “The Geographical Pivot of History.” Mackinder was a strong advocate of British imperialism, arguing that colonies in Africa and Asia constituted a safety valve for European society, and that a closure of the world to European imperialist expansion would lead to the unleashing of uncontrollable class forces within European societies. Central to his analysis was the recognition that the frontiers of the world were closed, resulting in heightened interimperialist rivalry.

“The great wars of history,” Mackinder wrote in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), “are the outcome, direct or indirect, of the unequal growth of nations.” Geopolitical reality was such as “to lend itself to the growth of empires, and in the end of a single World-Empire.”<sup>5</sup> A primary concern motivating Mackinder’s theoretical contributions was the decline of British economic hegemony, leading him eventually to conclude that British capital needed protectionism and military power to back it up. Britain “no less than Germany,” he claimed, “became ‘market-hungry,’ for nothing smaller than the whole world was market enough for her in her own special lines....Free-trading, peace-loving Lancashire has been supported by the *force* of the Empire....Both Free Trade of the *laissez-faire* type and Protection of the predatory type are policies of Empire, and both make for War.”<sup>6</sup>

Mackinder is best known for his doctrine of the “Heartland.” Geopolitical strategy was about the endgame of controlling the Heartland—or the enormous transcontinental land mass of Eurasia, encompassing Eastern Europe, Russia through Siberia, and Central Asia. The Heartland, together with the remainder of Asia and Africa, made up the World Island. The Heartland itself was defined by its inaccessibility to sea, making it “the greatest natural fortress on earth.” The Columbian Age dominated by sea

power, Mackinder argued, was coming to an end to be replaced by a new Eurasian age in which land power would be decisive. The development of land transportation and communication meant that land power could finally rival sea power. In the new Eurasian Age whoever ruled the Heartland, if also equipped with a modern navy, would be able to outflank the maritime world – the world controlled by the British and U.S. empires.

In *Democratic Ideals and Reality* Mackinder designated Eastern Europe as a strategic addition to the Heartland – the key to the command of Eurasia. Thus arose his oft-quoted dictum:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:  
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island:  
Who rules the World-Island commands the World.

Mackinder insisted that the most immediate foreign policy objective for the British Empire was to prevent any kind of alliance or bloc between Germany and Russia, and to keep either one from dominating Eastern Europe. Hence strong buffer states needed to be formed between these two great powers.

In 1919 the British government appointed Mackinder high commissioner for south Russia to help organize British support for General Denikin and the White Army in the Russian Civil War. Following the Red Army's defeat of Denikin, Mackinder returned to London and reported to the British government that, although German industrialization was rightly feared by Britain, Germany could not be allowed to collapse economically and militarily since it constituted the chief bulwark against Bolshevik control of Eastern Europe. Mackinder was knighted for his efforts on behalf of the empire.

Mackinder's geopolitical analysis was to have an even greater impact on German than on British war planning. The founder of the German school of *Geopolitik* was Friedrich Ratzel, whose most important works appeared in the 1890s. Ratzel sought to connect the Darwinian struggle for existence with the geopolitical struggle for space through an organic theory of the state. States were not static but naturally growing, borders were simply a skin that could be shed. It was Ratzel who first introduced the term "*lebensraum*" (or living space) as an imperative for the German polity. "There is in this small planet," he wrote, "sufficient space for only one great state."

The foremost German geopolitical thinker, however, was Karl Haushofer, who drew upon both Ratzel and Mackinder. Haushofer insisted that Germany needed to enlarge its *lebensraum*, the requirements of which were

evident in the disproportion between the German population and the natural geographic space necessary to accommodate it. He regarded the United States, with its ideology of Manifest Destiny, as the country that had most successfully employed geopolitics within its region. In this regard he saw the Monroe Doctrine, which stipulated that the United States had hegemony in the Americas and would not suffer the competition of any foreign power (along with the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary through which the United States claimed "international police power" in the Western Hemisphere) as the greatest practical implementation of geopolitics, pointing to the need for a parallel German Monroe Doctrine. Haushofer and his followers viewed Pan-Americanism as a geopolitical grouping through which the United States exercised its regional hegemony. He argued that similar regional hegemonies could be established around other great powers, notably Pan-Germanism or a Pan-Europe dominated by Germany.

British imperialism was for Haushofer the greatest threat to German power. One of his books included a world map showing a giant octopus located in the British Isles with its tentacles stretching out into every corner of the globe. The development of German strength to counter the British and American maritime world, he argued, lay in the creation of a great Eurasian intercontinental power bloc with Russia and Japan, in which Germany would be the senior partner. The alliance with Japan would counter British and American naval power in the Pacific. With the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 he wrote: "Now finally, the collaboration of *the Axis powers, and of the Far East*, stands distinctly before the German soul. At last, there is the hope of survival against the Anaconda policy [the strangling encirclement] of the Western democracies." Although relying primarily on geopolitics, Haushofer was to unite his ideas with the Nazi doctrine of "master-races."

Haushofer served as a brigade commander in the First World War, with Rudolf Hess as his aide-de-camp. He retired from the military with the rank of major general and took up a position as a lecturer at the University of Munich in 1919, where Hess continued as his student and disciple. Through Hess, Haushofer had direct contact with and served as an adviser to Hitler. After the failure of the Nazi Beer Hall Putsch in 1923 Hitler and later Hess were confined in the Fortress of Landsberg. As Hess's mentor, Haushofer frequently visited Hitler there while the latter was dictating *Mein Kampf* to Hess. Many of Haushofer's ideas, including his treatment of *lebensraum*, were thus adopted by Hitler and incorporated into *Mein Kampf*. In 1933 after the Nazi rise to power a professorship of defense geography was created for Haushofer at the University of Munich where he directed his Institute of

Geopolitics. In the following year Hitler appointed him president of the German Academy. After Hess's flight to Britain in 1941 Haushofer's influence with Hitler waned. He was consigned briefly to the Dachau concentration camp. His son, Albrecht (also a leading Nazi geopolitical analyst) was executed by the SS for involvement in the 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. Haushofer committed suicide after being interrogated by the Allies in 1946.

Nicholas John Spykman was a Dutch-American political scientist, sociologist, and journalist. Spykman wrote two major geopolitical works: *America's Strategy in World Politics* (1942), completed just before the U.S. entry in the Second World War, and his posthumous work, *The Geography of the Peace* (1944). He opposed a "rimland" thesis to Mackinder's Heartland doctrine, arguing that by controlling the amphibious rimlands of Europe, the Middle East, and the East Asia-Pacific Rim region, the United States could limit the power of the Eurasian Heartland. Spykman insisted that the United States should build North Atlantic and trans-Pacific naval and air bases, encircling Eurasia. Responding to Mackinder, Spykman wrote: "If there is to be a slogan for the power politics of the Old World, it must be 'Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.'"

In *America's Strategy in World Politics* Spykman insisted that U.S. policy must be "directed at the prevention of hegemony," defined as "a power position which would permit the domination of all within its [the hegemon's] reach." But in practice this meant the promotion of U.S.-British dominance.<sup>15</sup> By 1942 with the British Empire weakening and the U.S. Empire growing, an "American-British hegemony" of the globe, Spykman contended, was in the offing—provided that the German-Japanese attempt at world hegemony could be defeated. Although the Soviet Union was then an ally of the United States and Britain, Spykman nevertheless suggested in *The Geography of the Peace* that the primary goal must be to ensure that the Soviet Union not "establish a hegemony over the European rimland." The Soviet Union's "own strength, great as it is," he observed, "would be insufficient to preserve her security against a unified rimland" under U.S. hegemony, the existence of which would give the United States global supremacy.<sup>16</sup>

Spykman's views were widely read in U.S. policy circles, but beginning in 1942 the term "geopolitics," if not the concept itself, was increasingly off limits in the United States due to the alarms that had been raised in the U.S. media about German geopolitical thinking and Haushofer's influence on Hitler. It would be a quarter-century or more before the term would re-enter

public discourse. Although Spykman's rimland concept is often seen as providing the intellectual background behind George Kennan's notion of "containment," explicit references to Spykman's ideas in this context were notable by their absence.

## The Geopolitics of Pax Americana

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In 1939 State Department planners in conjunction with the Council on Foreign Relations initiated under conditions of extreme secrecy a high level War and Peace Studies (WPS) program, which continued to meet for the remainder of the war. The Rockefeller Foundation provided \$44,500 in funding for its first year of operation. The WPS envisaged a geopolitical region that it designated as the "Grand Area," and which consisted initially of the British and U.S. empires. "The Geopolitical analysis behind" the Grand Area, Noam Chomsky has explained, "attempted to work out which areas of the world have to be 'open' – open to investment, open to the repatriation of profits. Open, that is, to domination by the United States."

The new Grand Area was thus to constitute an informal empire, modeled after U.S. domination of Latin America, involving the free flow of capital, under the economic, political, and military hegemony of the United States. Since Germany then occupied Europe, the Grand Area was at first conceived as restricted to the U.S. imperial region, the British Empire, and the Far East (assuming the U.S. defeat of Japan in the Pacific). By the end of the war it had expanded to encompass all of Western Europe as well. Isaiah Bowman, a leading U.S. political geographer (sometimes referred to in the press at the time as "the American Haushofer"), and a key figure in the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote in 1941: "The measure of our victory will be the measure of our domination after victory."

In 1943 Mackinder published an article entitled "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace" in the Council on Foreign Relations' journal *Foreign Affairs*, which stated that "for our present purpose, it is sufficiently accurate to say that the territory of the USSR is equivalent to the Heartland."<sup>19</sup> For the first time, he argued, the Heartland was fully garrisoned and dangerous. The goal for the United States was therefore to counter the Soviet Heartland power. As Colin Gray observed in his *Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era* (1977), viewed in geopolitical terms, the Cold War was essentially a contest "between the insular *imperium* of the United States and the 'Heartland' *imperium* of the

Soviet Union....for control/denial of control of the Eurasian-African 'Rimlands.'" 20

Although explicit references to geopolitics were rare from the late 1940s to the 1970s, an exception to this was to be found in the work of James Burnham. Formerly a prominent leftist, Burnham played a major role in developing a geopolitics of anticommunism in the Cold War era. His postwar anticommunist blockbuster, *The Struggle for the World* (1947), was originally drafted as a secret study for the Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA) in 1944, and was intended for use by the U.S. delegation to the Yalta Conference. It was, he insisted, "an axiom of geopolitics that if any one power succeeded in organizing the [Eurasian] Heartland and its outer barriers, that power would be certain to control the world." Following Mackinder, Burnham claimed that the Soviet Union had emerged as the first great Heartland power, with a large, politically organized population, that was a threat to the World Island and hence the entire world. "Geographically, strategically, Eurasia encircles America, overwhelming it." The United States was an empire, yet refused to call itself such; therefore various euphemisms needed to be found. "Whatever the words, it is well also to know the reality. The reality is that the only alternative to the communist World Empire is an American Empire, which will be, if not literally world-wide in formal boundaries, capable of exercising decisive world control." Henry Luce actively promoted *The Struggle for the World* in *Time* magazine, and urged President Truman's political aide, Charles Ross, to get Truman to read it. Ronald Reagan presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Burnham in 1983, declaring that he had "profoundly affected the way America views itself and the world."

Geopolitics was to owe its resurrection as an explicit, even official, doctrine of U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s to the influence of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Faced with the debacle in Vietnam and the need to restore U.S. power in the context of a growing imperial crisis, Kissinger and President Nixon reached out to the concept of geopolitics. The thawing of the Cold War relations with China following the Sino-Soviet split and the initiation of détente with the Soviet Union were both presented as "geopolitical necessities." Kissinger's references to geopolitics were pervasive throughout his 1979 memoirs, *The White House Years*.

The 1970s witnessed along with the Vietnam defeat, economic stagnation and declining U.S. economic hegemony. By 1971 the U.S. empire had created such a huge dollar overhang abroad that Nixon was forced to decouple the dollar



from gold, weakening the position of the dollar as the hegemonic currency. The energy crisis associated with the Arab oil boycott in response to the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the rise of the OPEC oil cartel demonstrated the growing dependence of the U.S. automobile-petroleum complex on Persian Gulf oil. The recession of 1974–75 initiated a secular slowdown of the U.S. economy that has continued with minor interruptions for three decades.

With the entire U.S. empire in crisis beginning in the 1970s, and with its war machine effectively immobilized due to what conservatives labeled the “Vietnam Syndrome” (the unwillingness of the U.S. population to support military interventions in the periphery), countries throughout the third world sought to break out of the system. Much of the attention during this period was directed at Washington’s attempts to counter revolutions and revolutionary movements in Central America and the Caribbean, the “backyard” of the U.S. empire. But the biggest defeat experienced by the U.S. empire in the years following the Vietnam War was the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Shah of Iran, hitherto the lynchpin of U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—against which the CIA immediately launched the greatest covert war in history, recruiting fundamentalist Islamic forces (including Osama Bin Laden) for a modern jihad—only served to reinforce the view within U.S. national security circles that control over the Middle East and its oil was in jeopardy.

A massive attempt was therefore made in the 1980s and ’90s to reconstitute overall U.S. hegemony, especially the position of the United States in the Persian Gulf. The signal event was the Carter Doctrine, issued by President Carter in his State of the Union speech in January 1980, in which he declared that, “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.” Modeled after the Monroe Doctrine, the Carter Doctrine was meant to extend the umbrella of direct U.S. military hegemony over the Persian Gulf.

All of this was intended to meet the geopolitical imperatives of U.S. multinational corporations. For *Business Week* in January 28, 1980, it was crucial that the United States develop a “geopolitics of minerals,” in response to the forces challenging U.S. power around the world: “In the 1980s, beset by demands among the post-colonial regimes for a ‘new international economic order’ and a related antagonism toward the multinational resource corporations,” the United States was increasingly “vulnerable” to loss of

strategic materials and “world oil and raw material routes.” This, *Business Week* contended, would “force Washington to make some painful compromises between idealistic foreign policy goals and the revival of geopolitics.”

In 1983 the Reagan administration responded to such demands by establishing the U.S. Central Command (Centcom). Centcom is one of five regional “unified commands” governing U.S. combat forces around the globe. Its authority covers twenty-five nations in south-central Asia (including the Persian Gulf) and in the Horn of Africa. Its primary responsibility from the start was to keep the oil flowing. In the two decades of its existence, Klare notes, “Centcom forces have fought in four major engagements: the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the Afghanistan War of 2001, and the Iraq War of 2003[–].”

## The New Geopolitics

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But it was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that was to constitute the sea change for the U.S. empire. The U.S. assault on Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, was made possible by the erosion of the balance of power in the Middle East in the wake of the weakening of Soviet power. At the same time, the Soviet meltdown and signs of its possible breakup constituted one of the chief reasons why the United States refrained from invading and occupying Iraq during the Gulf War. Geopolitical uncertainties associated with the collapse of the Soviet bloc were such that Washington could not afford to pin down large numbers of troops in the Middle East. Nor could it risk the possibility that an invasion and occupation of Iraq might serve to revive Soviet concerns about U.S. imperialism, and thus delay or reverse the massive changes then occurring in that country. The Soviet Union’s demise came only months later in the summer of 1991.

The “new world order” that followed was soon dubbed a “unipolar world” with the United States as the sole superpower. The Department of Defense lost no time in initiating a strategic review known as the *Defense Planning Guidance*, directed by Paul Wolfowitz then undersecretary of defense for policy. Parts of this classified report, leaked to the press in 1992, stated in Spykman-like language that “Our strategy [after the fall of the Soviet Union] must refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.” Wolfowitz also took a leaf from the Heartland doctrine, arguing that “Russia will remain the strongest military power in Eurasia and the only

power in the world with the capability of destroying the United States." The *Defense Planning Guidance* proposed a global geopolitical goal for the United States of permanent military hegemony through preemptive actions. Yet, strong objections from U.S. allies forced Washington to back off from the draft report's explicit commitment to unilateral domination of the globe.

Over the following decade an intense debate took place within U.S. national security and foreign policy circles concerning the extent to which the United States should pursue the goal of indefinite planetary hegemony. Eugene Rostow, undersecretary of state for political affairs from 1966 to 1969, responded in 1993 to the collapse of the Soviet Union by pointing out that it was necessary to contain "the [Russian] Heartland area, [which] constitutes an enormous center of power from which military forces have attacked the coastal regions of Asia and Europe (the Rimlands, in Mackinder's [*sic.*] terminology)." Similarly, Kissinger wrote in 1994: "Students of geopolitics....argue, however, that Russia regardless of who governs it, sits astride what Halford Mackinder called the geopolitical heartland, and is the heir to one of the most important imperial traditions."<sup>26</sup> The express goal of such leading national security analysts was to secure the rimland as a means to global power. Much of the controversy in this period centered not so much on the endgame itself, but on whether the United States should rule the globe jointly with its junior partners in the triad (Western Europe and Japan) or should unilaterally seek its own empire of the earth.<sup>27</sup>

In the end the debate on the new world order was made academic by the actual exercise of U.S. military power abroad, as the United States in the George H. W. Bush and Clinton years actively sought to renew and extend its economic hegemony by military means. The immediate goal was clearly one of securing the perimeter to the Eurasian heartland following the Soviet demise. Thus military interventions occurred in the 1990s not only in the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa but in Yugoslavia in Eastern Europe, where NATO under the leadership of the United States bombed for eleven weeks (in the case of Kosovo) and then landed ground troops, leading to the establishment of permanent military bases in an area that had formerly been part of the Soviet sphere of influence. In the Persian Gulf Iraq was faced with an economic embargo and daily bombings by the United States and Britain. Meanwhile, the United States sought military bases in Central Asia in areas surrounding the oil-and-natural-gas-rich Caspian Sea basin, formerly part of the Soviet Union.

In 1999 Mackubin Thomas Owens, Professor of Strategy and Force Planning at the Naval War College, authored a landmark article for the *Naval War College Review* entitled "In Defense of Classical Geopolitics." Building on Mackinder and Spykman, while criticizing Haushofer, Owens insisted that the overwhelming geopolitical goal of the United States in the post-Cold War world remained that of preventing "the rise of a hegemon capable of dominating the Eurasian continental realm and of challenging the United States in the maritime realm."

Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, emerged in this period as one of the most avid proponents of the geopolitics of U.S. empire. In his *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (1997) he alluded directly to the Heartland doctrines promoted by Mackinder and Haushofer (and what he called "the much vulgarized echo" of this in "Hitler's emphasis on the German people's need for 'Lebensraum'"). What had changed was that, "geopolitics has moved from the regional to the global dimension, with preponderance over the entire Eurasian continent serving as the central basis for global primacy. The United States...now enjoys international primacy, with its power directly deployed on three peripheries of the Eurasian continent" – in the West (Europe), the South (south-central Eurasia, including the Middle East) and the East (East-Asia Pacific Rim). "America's global primacy," Brzezinski argued, "is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained." The goal, he argued, was to create a "hegemony of a new type," which he called "global supremacy," establishing the United States indefinitely as "the first and only truly global power."

During the Clinton administration both neoliberal globalization and imperial geopolitics governed foreign policy, but the former often took precedence. In the George W. Bush administration the double commitment remained, but the emphasis was reversed from the start, with more direct attention given to strengthening U.S. global primacy through the exercise of geopolitical/military as opposed to economic power. This shift can be seen in two key position statements issued at the time of the 2000 elections. The first was a foreign policy paper entitled *Rebuilding America's Defenses* released in September 2000, at vice-presidential candidate Dick Cheney's request, by the Project for the New American Century (a strategic policy group that included Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Lewis Libby, and George Bush's younger brother Jeb). This report strongly reasserted the overtly imperialist strategy of the *Defense Policy Guidance* of 1992. The other was a speech entitled "Imperial America," delivered on November 11, 2000 by Richard Haass, who was soon

to join Colin Powell's state department as director of policy planning. Haass insisted that the time had come for Americans "to re-conceive their role from a traditional nation-state to an imperial power." The main danger threatening the U.S. global order was not one of "imperial overstretch" as suggested by Paul Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* but "imperial understretch."

The immediate response of the Bush administration to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was to declare a universal and protracted global war on terrorism that was to double as a justification for the expansion of U.S. imperial power. The new *National Security Strategy of the United States*, delivered by the White House to Congress in September 2002, at the very same time that the administration was beating the war drums for an invasion of Iraq, was modeled after Wolfowitz's earlier *Defense Planning Guidance* of 1992. It established as official U.S. strategic policy: (1) preventing any state from developing military capabilities equal to or greater than the United States; (2) carrying out "preemptive" strikes against states that were developing new military capabilities that might eventually endanger the United States, its friends or allies—even in advance of any imminent threat; and (3) insisting on the immunity of U.S. officials and military personnel to any international war crime tribunals. Once again the language mirrored Spykman's declaration that the goal should be "directed at the prevention of hegemony"—though in this case the explicit goal was to prevent any future challenges to U.S. global supremacy.

Domination of Persian Gulf oil, through an invasion and occupation of Iraq, offered the quickest way of enhancing U.S. imperial power, ensuring that it would have a stranglehold over the world's major petroleum reserves in a time of growing demand and declining supply of oil worldwide. The fact that the preponderance of long-term oil and natural gas supplies are concentrated in the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea basin, and West Africa allows U.S. "vital interests" in this broad region to be dealt with more circumspectly in the language of geopolitics with little mention of the fossil fuels themselves.

In May 2004, Alan Larson, undersecretary of state for economic, business, and agricultural affairs, issued a report entitled "Geopolitics of Oil and Natural Gas," which declared that "it is almost an axiom in the petroleum business that oil and gas are most often found in countries with challenging political regimes or difficult physical geography." Here the geopolitics of oil and natural gas was seen as creating vital U.S. strategic interests in the Persian Gulf, Russia and the Caspian Sea basin, West Africa, and Venezuela.

The new geopolitics shares with classical geopolitics the aim of world domination, but entails a strategic shift aimed in particular at south-central Eurasia. "The purpose of the war in Iraq," according to Michael Klare, "is to redraw the geopolitical map of Eurasia to insure and embed U.S. power and dominance in the region vis-à-vis...other potential competitors" such as Russia, China, the European Community, Japan, and even India. "The U.S. elites have concluded that the European and East Asian rimlands of Eurasia are securely in American hands or [are] less important, or both. The new center of geopolitical competition, as they see it, is south-central Eurasia, encompassing the Persian Gulf area, which possesses two-thirds of the world's oil, the Caspian Sea basin, which has a large chunk of what's left, and the surrounding countries of Central Asia. This is the new center of world struggle and conflict, and the Bush administration is determined that the United States shall dominate and control this critical area."

In a special July 1999 supplement entitled "The New Geopolitics," the *Economist* magazine explicitly adopted Brzezinski's "grand chessboard" analysis, arguing that the key geopolitical struggle for the "empire of democracy" led by the United States after Kosovo was the control of Eurasia and particularly Central Asia. Both China and Russia were seen as potentially extending their geopolitical influence into the energy rich Caspian Sea basin. U.S. imperial expansion to preempt this was therefore necessary.

U.S. geopolitical strategy accepts no bounds short of Brzezinski's "global supremacy." It thus reflects what Mackinder called the tendency to a "single World-Empire." So brazen has this new geopolitics now become among today's empire enthusiasts that *Atlantic Monthly* correspondent Robert Kaplan began his recent book, *Imperial Grunts*, by celebrating the Pentagon's global military map of five "unified commands" in terms of its "uncanny resemblance" to a map "drawn in 1931 for the German military by Professor Karl Haushofer, a leading figure of *Geopolitik*." Lest his meaning remain unclear, Kaplan proceeded to refer to Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" as embodying "idealistic" values, and he went on to characterize his own journalistic "odyssey through the barracks and outposts of the American Empire" as a tour of the new "Injun Country."

## The Failures of Geopolitics

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The unpopularity of geopolitical analysis after 1943 is usually attributed to its association with the Nazi strategy of world conquest. Yet the popular rejection of geopolitics in that period may have also arisen from the deeper recognition that classical geopolitics in all of its forms was an inherently imperialist and war-related doctrine. As the critical geopolitical analyst Robert Strausz-Hupé argued in 1942, “In *Geopolitik* there is no distinction between war and peace. All states have the urge to expand, and the process of expansion is viewed as a perpetual warfare—no matter whether military power is actually applied or is used to implement ‘peaceful’ diplomacy as a suspended threat.”

U.S. imperial geopolitics is ultimately aimed at creating a global space for capitalist development. It is about forming a world dedicated to capital accumulation on behalf of the U.S. ruling class—and to a lesser extent the interlinked ruling classes of the triad powers as a whole (North America, Europe, and Japan). Despite “the end of colonialism” and the rise of “anti-capitalist new countries,” *Business Week* pronounced in April 1975, there has always been “the umbrella of American power to contain it...[T]he U.S. was able to fashion increasing prosperity among Western countries, using the tools of more liberal trade, investment, and political power. The rise of the multinational corporation was the economic expression of this political framework.”

There is no doubt that the U.S. imperium has benefited those at the top of the center-capitalist nations and not just the power elite of the United States. Yet, the drive for global hegemony on the part of particular capitalist nations and their ruling classes, like capital accumulation itself, recognizes no insurmountable barriers. Writing before September 11, 2001, István Mészáros argued in his *Socialism or Barbarism* that due to unbridled U.S. imperial ambitions the world was entering what was potentially “the most dangerous phase of imperialism in all history”:

For what 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...This is what the ultimate rationality of globally developed capital requires, in its vain attempt to bring under control its irreconcilable antagonisms. The trouble is, though, that such rationality...is at the same time the most extreme form of irrationality in

history, including the Nazi conception of world domination, as far as the conditions required for the survival of humanity are concerned.

In the present era of naked imperialism, initiated by the sole superpower, the nature of the threat to the entire planet and its people is there for all to see. According to G. John Ikenberry, Professor of Geopolitics and Global Justice at Georgetown University, in his 2002 *Foreign Affairs* article "America's Imperial Ambition": the U.S. "neoimperial vision" is one in which "the United States arrogates to itself the global role of setting standards, determining threats, using force, and meting out justice." At present the United States currently enjoys both economic (though declining) and military primacy. "The new goal," he states, "is to make these advantages permanent—a fait accompli that will prompt other states to not even try to catch up. Some thinkers have described the strategy as 'breakout.'" Yet, such a "hard-line imperial grand strategy," according to Ikenberry—himself no opponent of imperialism—could backfire.

From the standpoint of Marxian theory, which emphasizes the economic taproot of imperialism, such a global thrust will be as ineffectual as it is barbaric. Power under capitalism can be imposed episodically through the barrel of a gun. Its real source, however, is relative economic power, which is by its nature fleeting.

The foregoing suggests that interimperialist rivalry did not end as is often thought with the rise of U.S. hegemony. Rather it has persisted in Washington's drive to unlimited hegemony, which can be traced to the underlying logic of capital in a world divided into competing nation states. The United States as the remaining superpower is today seeking final world dominion. The "Project for the New American Century" stands for an attempt to create a U.S.-led global imperium geared to extracting as much surplus as possible from the countries of the periphery, while achieving a "breakout" strategy with respect to the main rivals (or potential rivals) to U.S. global supremacy. The fact that such a goal is irrational and impossible to sustain constitutes the inevitable failure of geopolitics.

Marxian theories of imperialism have always focused on the importance of geoeconomics even more than the question of geopolitics. From this standpoint, uneven-and-combined capitalist development results in shifts in global productive power that cannot be controlled by geopolitical/military means. Empire under capitalism is inherently unstable, forever devoid of a genuine world state and pointing to greater and potentially more dangerous



wars. Its long-term evolution is toward barbarism—armed with ever more fearsome weapons of mass destruction.

What hope remains under these dire circumstances lies in the building of a new world peace movement that recognizes that what ultimately must be overcome is not a particular instance of imperialism and war, but an entire world economic system that feeds on militarism and imperialism. The goal of peace must be seen as involving the creation of a world of substantive equality in which global exploitation and the geopolitics of empire are no longer the principal objects. The age-old name for such a radical egalitarian order is “socialism.”

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## Notes

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1. Michael Klare, “The New Geopolitics,” *Monthly Review*, vol. 55, no. 3 (July–August 2003), 51–56. The phrase “economic taproot of imperialism” is taken from John Hobson’s classic 1902 work *Imperialism: A Study* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 71.
2. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 147.
3. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1890); Brooks Adams, *The New Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1902); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1921). The Turner book contains his original 1893 article and his 1896 *Atlantic Monthly* analysis in which he extended the argument to encompass the need for U.S. overseas expansion—see *The Frontier in History*, 219.
4. Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4 (April 1904), 421–44.
5. Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1919), 1–2.
6. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 179–81. For the evolution of Mackinder’s economic views see Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1960), 157–68.
7. Halford Mackinder, “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 4, (July 1943), 601.
8. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 186.
9. Brian W. Blouet, *Halford Mackinder* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 172–77.

10. Ratzel quoted in Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics: The Struggle for Space and Power* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), 31.
11. Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics*, 66, 227; Neumann, *Behemoth*, 156–60.
12. Haushofer quoted in Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics*, 152; Neumann, *Behemoth*, 144.
13. Derwent Whittlesey, "Haushofer: Geopoliticians," in Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 388–411; *German Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1942), 70–78; Andreas Dorpalen, *The World of General Haushofer* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1942), 70–78; David Thomas Murphy, *The Heroic Earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany, 1918–1933* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997); Saul B. Cohen, *Geopolitics in the World System* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 21–22.
14. Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1944), 43.
15. Nicholas John Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1942), 19, 458–60.
16. Spykman, *Geography of the Peace*, 57.
17. Noam Chomsky, "The Cold War and the Superpowers," *Monthly Review*, vol. 33, no. 6 (November 1981), 1–10; Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 325–31.
18. Smith, *American Empire*, 287, 329.
19. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," 598.
20. Colin S. Gray, *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era* (New York: Crane, Russak, and Co., 1977), 14.
21. James Burnham, *The Struggle for the World* (New York: John Day, 1947), 114–15, 162, 182; Gary Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22–25; Francis P. Sempa, *Geopolitics: From the Cold War to the 21st Century* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 25–63. Like Burnham, Raymond Aron referred to the Soviet Union as a danger to the World Island in his *Century of Total War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 111.
22. Leslie W. Hepple, "The Revival of Geopolitics," *Political Geography Quarterly*, volume 5, no. 4 (October 1986), supplement, S21–S36.
23. "Fresh Fears that the Soviets Will Cut Off Critical Minerals," *Business Week*, January 28, 1980, 62–63; Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 180–81.
24. Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004), 2.
25. "Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: 'Preventing the Re-Emergence of a New Rival,'" *New York Times*, March 8, 1992; "Keeping the U.S. First," *Washington Post*, March 11, 1992; Dorrien, *Imperial Design*, 40–41.

26. Eugene V. Rostow, *A Breakfast for Bonaparte* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1993), 14; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 814.
27. Renewed interest in Mackinder's work in this context led to the reprinting of *Democratic Ideals and Reality* by the National Defense University in 1996.
28. Mackubin Thomas Owens, "In Defense of Classical Geopolitics," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1999), <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press/review/1999/autumn/art3-a99.htm>.
29. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 3, 10, 30, 38-39.
30. See John Bellamy Foster "'Imperial America' and War," *Monthly Review*, vol. 55, no. 1 (May 2003), 1-10.
31. Alan Larson, "Geopolitics of Oil and Natural Gas," *Economic Perspectives*, May 2004 <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/ites//0504/ijee/larson.htm>.
32. Klare, "The New Geopolitics," 53-54.
33. "The New Geopolitics," *⇨ Economist*, July 31, 1999, 13, 15-16.
34. Robert Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts* (New York: Random House, 2005), 3-15.
35. Strausz-Hupé, *Geopolitics*, 101.
36. "The Fearful Drift of Foreign Policy," *⇨ Business Week*, April 7, 1975, 21.
37. István Mészáros, *Socialism or Barbarism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 38.
38. G. John Ikenberry, "America's Imperial Ambition," *Foreign Affairs* vol. 81, no. 5 (September-October 2002), 44, 50, 59.

**Source:**



**Monthly Review, 2006, Volume 57, Issue 08 (January)**

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