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War Drive

The 'war on terror' - a first balance sheet

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In the [November 2001 issue of IV](#) I argued that the US 'war on terror' represented a determined attempt to push world politics to the right under US hegemony, and to deliver harsh blows against all the main opponents of the US at home and abroad. The political-military offensive of the Bush team, I argued, targeted in particular the global justice movement, the third world, the European Union and opponents at home, including the Democrats in Congress. It also aimed to help the US achieve key US political and economic targets, which revolve around the general objective of breaking down all barriers to the absolute domination of the US corporations. Now, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, since September 11 the US project has an overarching ideology, the 'war against terrorism'. It represents an ambitious new stage, an attempt to politically wipe out the opposition to the US corporations, and to secure for decades ahead the new world order which Bush senior talked about at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iraq war.

Ideologically, the 'war on terrorism' is an increasingly open and blatant espousal of imperialism, leading to some observers (like the British professor Niall Ferguson) to say to the US it should come out and openly declare that only US domination - virtual US world government - can make things work for capitalism. A more 'multilateral' version of this has been proclaimed by British premier Tony Blair, whose Labour Party conference speech in October espoused a new vision of the 'white man's burden', the duty of the West to rule and civilise the backward natives.

Any balance sheet of how far the US has succeeded in its objectives since September 11 must be extremely provisional. When the Bush-Cheney team declare that this will be a prolonged campaign, they mean it. The next year will provide important new tests of strength between the US and its political opponents which will make the picture clearer. But already certain trends are clear, namely:-

- America has - predictably - succeeded in its military objectives of destroying the Taliban regime and the Al Qaida network, although not - at the time of writing - in capturing or killing Osama Bin Laden.
- The relative ease of this victory, and the low US 'body count', has strengthened the Pentagon 'hawks' and weakened the more cautious camp around Colin Powell in the State Department. This makes new short-term attacks on other states much more likely, in turn making the building and extension of the world peace movement vital.
- The alliance which the US built around the attack on Afghanistan has largely held up, with spectacular results in relation to Russia, but it is now clear that this will probably not survive the extension of the campaign to an assault on Iraq, Yemen, Somalia or Sudan. The US understands this and basically doesn't care.
- At the Doha World Trade Organisation Meeting in November the US succeeded in getting through its main agenda, the launching of a new round of talks about liberalising world trade, the first such talks since the end of the Uruguay round of the GATT talks in 1994. But substantial problems remain, particularly opposition in the US Congress.
- Any US attempt to diplomatically resist Ariel Sharon's ploy of making Israel's anti-Palestinian war part of the 'war on terrorism' has now dropped out of sight; and the occasional Bush-Blair talk of a Palestinian state is clearly a cover for allowing the Israelis to do what they want.
- Numerous governments have responded enthusiastically to the US offer to add their domestic opponents to the list

of terrorists who the 'international community' is waging war against, including Turkey, India, the Philippines and Spain, but none more gratefully than Vladimir Putin, who has seen his genocide in Chechnya sanctified as part of the 'war on terrorism'. And the EU governments in particular have backed the attack on democratic rights, which has its most outrageous levels in the mass detentions without trial in the US, and the new anti-terrorism draft law in the UK, which is now however under serious threat in parliament.

– The evidence so far is that the global justice movement has not been decisively set back, and indeed its existence has contributed to the rapid building of a mass anti-war movement, the centre of which is Italy and Britain. However, for the moment, North America is the one possible exception to this assessment.

The war

The US unleashed the full range of its arsenal against Afghanistan, with predictably murderous results. Bombs used against the Taliban have been of equal destructive capacity to tactical nuclear weapons, although of course without the radioactive fallout. Thousands have been massacred as a result. Professor Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire has calculated, by cross-referencing all the reports of civilian deaths, that 3,750 civilians have died under the US bombardment - already more than died on September 11. Thousands more fighters have died and it is clear that the US has given the green light to anti-Taliban forces to kill non-Afghan prisoners (mainly from Arab countries and Pakistan). US and British 'special forces' have directed these massacres, most notoriously after the battles of Kunduz and Kandahar. In both cases about 400 fighters are known to have been slaughtered.

After the battle for Kandahar up to 100 prisoners died while being transported in sealed containers.

As in Iraq and Kosovo the US victory has been based on the massive use of airpower, with minimal commitment of US ground forces, and a consequently low 'body count' of US dead, although it is probably several times more than the 10 or so reported in the press. Even if the total of US dead were 100, historically this is a minute level of casualties. This in turn has created a militarist euphoria in Washington, with immediate consequences for the 'war against terrorism'. [\[1\]](#)

Hawks in the ascendancy

This has sharply changed the balance of power between the 'hawks' around Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, and his even more trigger-happy deputy Paul Wolfowitz, and the more cautious Secretary of State Colin Powell. Of course, the different positions of these two camps are only different tactical options; but it's clear that the lead person now in White House deliberations is Rumsfeld, and that Powell is marginalized - at least for the moment. [\[2\]](#) That means we can expect the conclusion of the war in Afghanistan to be followed more or less directly by attacks on other 'rogue states'. This is especially so since the US had made it clear that it is not interested in any post-war peace-keeping or 'nation-building' role which will be left to the UN and the British.

Whether or not Bush starts with Somalia, Yemen or Sudan, the prime target is of course Iraq. Probably the US will try to 'liberate' a major Iraqi city, or corner of the country, and proclaim an anti-Saddam government from there. This means that a major war with Iraq, with incalculable consequences in terms of casualties and material damage, is now virtually certain sometime in the next year or so. As the London Daily Mirror has reported at length, both the Iraqi military and the civilian population have been preparing for this war since soon after September 11.

However in a recent interview with the New York Times, deputy secretary of defence Paul Wolfowitz said that Iraq was not the next target for military action. The next phase, he said, would try to "cut off terrorist bases internationally" - and this meant in such places as Somalia, Yemen, Indonesia and the Philippines. According to the NY Times, "With no effective opposition movement inside Iraq, and much of Europe and the Arab world strongly opposed to military action, this is not the time for Washington to wage war against Saddam Hussein."

Immediate targets for US, or US-led, military action seem to revolve around the following:

- Sending 1,000 US combat troops to the Philippines to assist government forces against Islamic guerrillas in the southern islands. A deal with the Philippines government on this appears to have been done.
- Pushing forward Plan Colombia, in particular aiding the Pastrana government in dismantling the areas - the size of Switzerland - currently controlled by the rebel FARC. At the time of writing, a full-scale attack on the liberated zone, created in 1998, appears imminent. Government victory in this attack would unleash a bloody reign of death squad terror against the 90,000 inhabitants of the region
- Limited military action, by the US or proxy forces, against factions in Sudan, Somalia or Yemen. Already the Yemeni government, under US pressure, has launched a military strike against allegedly Al Qaeda controlled villages in the mountains.

One factor which is a 'wild card' in possible US military plans is the growing political scandal over the collapse of the energy giant Enron - the largest corporate collapse in history. Virtually the whole of the Bush team were recipients of large amounts of cash from Enron's corrupt management, and some are implicated in covering up the scale of Enron's debts - which eventually led to tens of thousands of employees losing their jobs, savings and pensions while the directors - warned in advance - secretly sold all their shares, making a fortune in the process. This scandal reaches all the way up to the White House, and demonstrates precisely the way American capitalism works. British writer Will Hutton commented on this, "American democracy is increasingly a fraud. Money buys influence, votes and office. Contemporary Washington makes Caligula's Rome look like a vicar's tea party." Some spectacular new military action would neatly divert domestic attention from Bush's role in these sordid events.

As we discuss below, this ongoing military intervention leading eventually to a war on Iraq imposes immense responsibilities on the anti-war movement. The pre-existing alliance in support of the Afghanistan war will collapse with the launch of a new war in the Gulf. Basically the US doesn't care. Rumsfeld has declared "the war must determine the alliance, not the alliance the war". In other words, we decide the war, and build a new alliance from there.

Afghanistan has taught them that they are in an immensely powerful position, and can get eventual de facto complicity with their war aims from the most important Arab countries - Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan - even if Syria's al-Assad will make the predictable critical noises. The rulers of the three above-mentioned states are all clients of the United States, and the Saudi royal family is dependent on the formidable US military presence in that country to guarantee its very survival.

Of course US action in the Gulf will be opposed by the Arab 'street' - the popular masses. But again, the examples of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia during the Afghanistan war have taught the Bush administration that this opposition means little if it doesn't directly threaten the stability of the states concerned. Richard Pearle, a former member of the Reagan administrations, popularly known as the "Prince of Darkness", and very close to Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, put it bluntly on BBC's Newsnight: "This is not a war about hearts and minds, this is a war to defend the US. We don't care about the Arab street".

More uncertain and serious will be the consequences of the extension of the war for the European 'allies'. It is an open secret that Tony Blair is doubtful about attacking Iraq, and probably the other major European states - particularly France - will be opposed. However, come the actual war, and Tony Blair will get into line. Already his foreign minister, Jack Straw, has 'warned' Saddam Hussein that he must re-admit 'weapons inspectors' or 'face the consequences', a clear sign of preparations for a change of line in London. And the other European leaders, again with the partial exception of the French, are probably too deeply compromised by their cowardly support for the 'war on terror' so far to frontally oppose the US over Iraq.

Trade wars

At the Doha (Qatar) World Trade Organisation meeting in November, the US got the main part of what it wanted - the opening of a new round of trade 'liberalisation' talks - even if it had to make some concessions to third world countries, mainly on the issue of the manufacture of a limited number of cheap generic medicines, for example anti-retrovirals for combating AIDS.

However, despite the Bush administration getting its way at Doha, it has major problems with this issue in the US Congress. Bush wants to 'fast track' new free trade agreements, without detailed and lengthy discussion and approval by the House of Representatives. [3] The reason for this is Bush's ambition to have a new Free Trade Area of the Americas - NAFTA extended to the whole of Latin America - in place before he leaves office and certainly on the way to being implemented before the next presidential election. This may be a 'pet project' of Bush's, but it also represents a significant part of the US's economic-political strategy - absolute hegemony over the Americas, which is not of course counterposed to fighting for hegemony everywhere else.

The problem for Bush is that while NAFTA has been an overwhelming success for most US corporations involved in the maquiladora industries along the Mexican frontier, and large agribusiness corporations, it has hit some traditional industries, particularly textiles, steel and agriculture in Florida where jobs have been lost. Democrats (and some Republicans) in the House representing these areas have tried to resist the extension of free trade to the rest of Latin America by demanding that new agreements incorporate minimum labour and environmental standards; in this they are supported by an alliance which includes important trade union leaders and some environmental groups.

Naturally the Bush regime is against these minimum standards: in a first vote in the House on December 7, 2001 the administration won by just one vote, a sign of further close battles to come. Further battles with the Congressional Democrats are developing over the country's energy crisis, and the package of economic stimulus measures which Bush wants to help overcome the recession.

Russia and Star Wars

The speed with which Vladimir Putin aligned Russia with the 'war on terrorism' surprised many, and probably the United States itself. His stance is reflected in his decision to give the go-ahead to the stationing of US special forces in Uzbekistan, and his mild reaction to the widely forecast US decision to pull out of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty [4] in preparation for the new 'Son of Star Wars' programme.

Putin would be an idiot to believe Bush's claim that the anti-missile proposals are not aimed at Russia (although correct to believe that the main target is China). But Putin's role in the 'alliance against terrorism' represents absolutely fundamental strategic choices for the Russian leadership.

Putin has decided to go for an explicit relationship of neo-colonial dependency with the United States, a logical course for the mafia-bourgeois and comprador strata which he represents. Putin will be co-operative on numerous fronts understanding about missile defence, co-operative on helping to disrupt OPEC attempts to put up the world price of oil, non-disruptive about bringing the Baltic states in NATO and helpful in ensuring that Europeans don't monopolise Russia's exports of energy (although Russia will be the main supplier of natural gas to Western Europe in the coming years).

In return Putin gets three things. The US and Europeans will keep quiet about the continued genocidal state terrorism in Chechnya; Russia will be 'consulted' about major NATO decisions; and the Bush administration will try to help re-start the flow of inward investment, abruptly stopped when the rouble collapsed in 1997. Putin may feel that the stabilisation of the Russian economy since 1997, and the trend towards small economic growth, will aid this process. But the economic recession in the US and Europe will not.

Overall of course the US will gain much more than Russia. But from the point of view of a pro-capitalist government in Moscow, what more can it -and its super-rich and middle class supporters in the western cities - gain from trying to play a hard nationalist line?

Palestine

To ensure verbal support from Arab nations, in the immediate aftermath of September 11 the Bush regime, echoed by Tony Blair, made verbal gestures in the direction of the need for a Palestinian state. It seemed that Bush was embarrassed by Sharon's attempt to climb aboard the anti-terrorist bandwagon, and indeed British government spokespeople stressed the differences between the conflicts in Palestine and Afghanistan. Part of this stance was the rejection by Bush of Paul Wolfowitz's plan to attack Hizbullah camps in the Syrian-controlled Beq'aa valley in Lebanon.

Now the implicitly critical position in relation to Israel has gone completely, and Bush is content to talk about Hamas in the same breath as Osama Bin Laden, simply echoing Ariel Sharon.

Sharon's government is engaged in a plan to militarily, economically, politically and psychologically crush the Palestinians. The hundreds dead from military attacks and assassinations are just one part of an overall tightening of repression, which centrally involves repeated curfews; putting towns and villages under siege; demolishing Palestinian houses, businesses and political offices; arrests, beating and torture; closing off access to Israel thus preventing people going to work; shutting down roads between Palestinian areas, and creating a general atmosphere of fear and demoralisation.

The second-rate Bantustan plan of the Oslo agreement has been replaced by a "semi-autonomy together with occupation-by-consent" notion. The Palestinians, if they agree to keep quiet and give up the struggle, can administer tiny isolated fragments of land, but constantly supervised by the Israeli military. There is nil possibility of the young generation of Palestinians ever accepting this, and every prospect of repression strengthening the grip of Hamas and other Islamist groups. On the horizon is the terrifying prospect of an all-out pogrom, to drive the Palestinians out of the West Bank forever.

War on civil liberties

In the United States basic civil liberties have been thrown in the dustbin. Between 600 and 1,000 people have been detained without trial, often without access to lawyers, frequently beaten and abused, for being terrorism 'suspects'. In this hysterical atmosphere there is now serious discussion in Congress and beyond about the reintroduction of torture as a legitimate means of getting information from suspects. The US will establish military tribunals, presided over by top generals, to try terrorist suspects, and these tribunals will have the power to impose the death sentence.

All resistance - previously strong from big business and the banks - to total FBI and CIA access to Internet communications and encryption keys has collapsed. The big Internet service providers have indicated they are already co-operating with the intelligence agencies to monitor internet traffic.

Not least of the assaults on civil liberties has been the fate of the Taliban prisoners held by the United States, some of whom have been sent off to the Guantanamo base in Cuba - manacled, hooded and some sedated - to face military tribunals which can kill them. Peter Beaumont, writing in the London Observer (January 13, 2002), commented: "The reality of what is happening to the prisoners of Afghanistan is a scandal of international proportions. Brutalised, often tortured, these are men who have been stripped of their most basic rights under international and US law..." Beaumont points out that if they are not prisoners of war, then they are criminals, and should have the right to normal trials under the criminal justice system. Beaumont argues, "In a few deft strokes, the administration of George Bush has dropped a 'daisycutter' not only on the Geneva Conventions, designed to protect the rights of prisoners of war, but also on America's own constitutional rights for defendants."

The EU countries have agreed a Europe-wide arrest warrant to target 'terrorism' and 'organised crime', despite the comic opposition of the Italian government who wanted financial crimes and corruption excluded!

Britain's new anti-terrorism law is implementing powers to prevent people travelling to other European countries to attend any political, sporting, social or other event which it deems dangerous to public security.

The one positive feature in this situation is the indication by European governments that they will refuse to extradite to the United States anyone who could face the death sentence there.

Global justice movement not defeated

An anti-war movement has been built in record time. In Italy giant mobilisations have taken place, with maybe 250,000 people on the march from Assisi to Perugia and over 100,000 people in Rome in November, dwarfing the simultaneous pro-war demonstration called by Berlusconi. In London, 75,000 demonstrated on November 18, including strong contingents from the trade unions and thousands of students; this latter demonstration was called by a coalition led by the far left and had the fingerprints of the main socialist organisations all over it, a symbol of the attempts by the extreme left to occupy the vacuum left by the collapse of the Labour left and the disappearance of the Communist Party.

These mobilisations show a lot of things. Tariq Ali, a leader of the anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s, said at the Socialist Alliance conference in London on December 1, "What we are seeing with the global justice movement and the building of the anti-war movement in record time is the knocking at the door of a new generation". The mass involvement of young people, in Genoa in July, in the 350,000-strong student demonstration in Madrid on December 1, 2002 and in the anti-war protests is an enormously positive feature of the present crisis.

In Italy, while the mobilisations are probably fed by mass opposition to the Berlusconi regime, they are also a

tremendous vindication of the project of the Party of Communist Refoundation, which has been a key political factor in the mass demonstrations from Genoa onwards.

In Europe in general, but also in the United States, the anti-war feeling has been fostered by the left and left-liberal intelligentsia, which refuses to go away. In the English-speaking countries there has been an outpouring of anti-war writing; in Britain this has found an important echo in the mass circulation press. But in the United States, the mass media has been all but unanimous, a reflection of the much more difficult situation for the global justice and anti-war movement in North America. This was perhaps shown in the size of the demonstration outside the IMF-World Bank meeting in Ottawa - just 5,000 - although the appalling weather conditions that day makes it difficult to judge. However, major global justice demonstrations are being planned against the IMF-World Bank meeting in New York on February 21, 2002. This will be a major test of the ability of the anti-corporate globalisation forces to mobilise in the face of what is likely to be vociferous opposition from politicians, the media and the police.

One thing is certain. If the United States moves on to attack Iraq the anti-war movement will explode in size.

There are two other indicators that the global justice and other popular movements have not been collapsed by the aftermath of September 11; the December 1, 2002 demonstration of 350,000 students in Madrid, and the 80,000 trade unionists who demonstrated at the European summit in Brussels on December 13, 2002.

But the popular movement is now going to have to answer some searching questions; most particularly, can a real mass anti-war movement be built to respond to continuing military intervention and an eventual attack on Iraq and break the pro-war consensus at an international level.

[1] Although the US government should pay heed to Naomi Klein's article 'Game Over', which two days after the September 11 attacks pointed out that the US casualties were not on the field of battle, but in the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

[2] A detailed account of the infighting in the Bush administration can be found in 'Powell loses power over Pentagon', Julian Bolger, Guardian, December 11. www.guardianunlimited.co.uk - see archive.

[3] Bush will have no problem getting fast track through the Senate however. For information on this see www.washingtonpost.com.

[4] The ABM treaty didn't ban all anti-missile missiles, but allowed both the USA and USSR to have two such systems, one to protect its capital and the other to protect its main ICBM site.