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War Drive

# America's global gamble

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**Peter Gowan is a long-time editor of New Left Review and author of *The Global Gamble - America's Faustian Bid for World Domination* (Verso 2000), which won the Isaac Deutscher memorial prize. In the light of the events since September 11, his argument that the US is trying to establish absolute world domination seems remarkably prescient. IV talked to him about the international situation now.**

*HOW should we understand the US aims in the 'war on terrorism'?*

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Bush\\_and\\_Wolfowitz-2.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Bush_and_Wolfowitz-2.jpg)]

The declared aims of course are to defeat 'terrorists' and to overthrow the regimes of 'rogue states'. Out of the four terrorist movements and three rogue states mentioned by Bush in his State of the Union speech, two of the states and three of the movements are Middle Eastern supporters of the Palestinian struggle and enemies of the United States and Israel. This regional concentration of US targets reflects the fact that the US is in very serious political difficulties in the Middle East and is attempting to use the domestic and international mobilization in the wake of September 11 as a political base for a coercive drive against Iraq as the key to resolving its vulnerabilities in the region.

But beyond these tactical goals the US is attempting, as Colin Powell put it four days after September 11, to use the attack 'as an opportunity to reshape relations throughout the world' - in other words for US global programmatic goals. This 'reshaping' involves a drive to anchor US 'unipolarity', taking advantage of its overwhelming military power for this political goal. The first Bush administration and the Clinton administrations were equally dedicated to this goal. But September 11 gave the US new possibilities for moving forward towards achieving it.

The discourse of the 'Campaign against Terrorism' (CAT) actually expresses and justifies a unipolar globe. It says any state or movement considered by the US to be 'evil' must be disarmed (have its weapons of mass destruction removed) and must have its regime changed. States which wish to avoid this fate must ally with the US - no more neutrality in world politics - and states allying with the US are entering a US protectorate: providing facilities for the extension of US reach across the globe.

All of this is included in the CAT. Put another way, the Bush administration is trying to process its drive for world dominance through the CAT. And the CAT is valuable for this precisely because it justifies the drive at a popular level within the USA and partly within the whole OECD: people need US dominance because of the terror threat. Whether the CAT will work in this way is another matter: the drive to 'end' Iraq, as Paul Wolfowitz, the key intellectual in the Bush team put it, while keeping the lid on elsewhere will be a decisive test.

And even then, the capacity of the US to anchor its unipolar dominance politically will be far from assured. It faces strategic political (though not military) challenges to its global ambitions right across Eurasia from Western Europe through to China. The world is very much still in transition between world orders: nothing has been settled 10 years after the Soviet Bloc collapse.

One way of noticing the current interregnum is by looking at the rival world order concepts. The US concept since the Gulf War of 1991 has been of a globe with an American 'sovereign', in the sense of 'sovereign' used by the German political and legal theorist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt says those are sovereign who can a) determine who is a friend and

who is an enemy b) declare a state of emergency c) change the rules of the game, that is arbitrarily change the laws. This is what the US has been trying to impose on the globe since 1991: it alone can tell us who the enemies of the world are - Saddam Hussein, Milosevic, the Taliban government, Iran and so on. It alone can tell us what is a global emergency and what is not and thus when the global norms do not apply because the situation is not normal; and it can lay down the rules which others must follow without being bound by those rules itself.

Against this US conception, there are two other main ideas about how world capitalism should be managed. The Europeans put forward the world order concept of 'multilateralism', the rule of the 'international community', which means that there should be joint leadership around the G7 leading industrial nations and behind that the OECD. This conception, counter-posed to what they see as American 'unilateralism', does in turn mean undermining the sovereignty of nations. It means the G7's right to intervene if it doesn't like what a particular state is doing - as with Zimbabwe today.

The problem for the Europeans is that the Americans see this as a competitive strategy to their own, in fact the main competitor. They see the Europeans as trying to set the rules for the Americans or to bind the US to its own past rules. The US should be in some way subordinate to the G7, thematised as 'the international community.' That's why Condolizeesa Rice, presidential security advisor, says, "there's no such thing as an international community".

There is a third conception, that of the UN security council and UN Charter as the determiners of world order, and this has been put forward by the Chinese, the Russians (although Putin now seems to want to leave this Camp for the G7 camp), the French and Germans to a certain extent, and other powerful states like India as well as many other states. That conception of world order should not be discounted, because it not only enjoys support from states, and is also anchored in the consciousness of billions of people. I would say that in a certain way you can see the power and persistence of this concept in the capacity of the Palestinian Intifada.

*Surely it's obvious who won the Cold War - America won the Cold War. The question really is this; why does the United States have to resort to military power to establish its hegemony? Can't America establish its supremacy through its trans-national corporations, which in so many fields are dominant? For example, in the 1990s the US corporations clearly overtook all competitors in the field of computer technology and most microelectronics, which was not so clear before. Why does it need all these wars? In what way, for example, is permanent war in Palestine in US interests?*

The only thing you can say for certain is that capitalism won the Cold War. This was a huge ideological and political victory, and it's true that in the 1990s there has been a big effort by the major capitalist powers to consolidate that victory, by outlawing any future possible socialist challenge. It's also true that there has been a co-operative effort on the part of the Atlantic powers to move 'outwards', to establish their economic and political hegemony in areas of the world which were inaccessible to them during the Cold War. But the degree of co-operation among the major capitalist powers has been very limited and often little more than rhetorical. Inter-imperialist competition remains very strong, especially between the US and Europe.

But this competition between Europe and America has not been directly about economics: it has been about political forms and centres of political authority, in the first place in Europe itself. With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc the West Europeans have been trying to build their own political centre throwing off the Cold War American protectorate in Europe and extending the influence of their own centre Eastwards. If this were to succeed it could ultimately involve a link up of a European political centre with a capitalist Russia.

That is potentially very threatening for the United States. And in East Asia, there is a similar political risk: of a rising and opening China becoming a regional political-economy centre for ASEAN, South Korea and possibly even Japan. If, then, Western and Eastern Eurasia adopted similar lines on a range of global political issues that would amount to

a major challenge to US power. In short, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc had paradoxical and contradictory effects: it both made the USA the overwhelmingly dominant military power and it threatened to undermine the US cold war protectorate system over the capitalist core. It is this contradiction that is driving much of world politics and most of US external strategy today.

Of course, many see these political battles as being of minor significance. They think the big story is economics and 'globalisation'. And they view this as the emergence of a more or less unified and autonomous world market where trans-national corporations from all the core countries cooperate to make the rules and exploit the world. And they see states and their political rivalries as taking a back seat.

There is an element of truth in this picture as far as North-South relations are concerned. There is collaboration of the Europeans and the US in imposing exploitative arrangements on the South. But we must remember that in the pattern of global capitalism shaped by American power since 1945 the big centres of value creation and realization have been within the core, a core that has expanded in very important extents into the new 'emerging' capitalisms of East and South East Asia.

The battle for capitalist supremacy takes place within this core.

And here, the degree of acceptance of autonomous market rules for capitalist competition is actually both limited and fragile. Economic regimes are far more based upon political compromises and political pressures than the proponents of 'economic globalisation' believe. Since the 1980s, this politicisation of economics has been hidden by a common project in Europe and in the US: the trans-national neo-liberal drive by capital against labour. This makes it seem as though there is something like a trans-national ruling class united in more or less everything. But this is wrong: it is simply a unity in a common tactic which each national capitalist class pursues for removing the social rights, weakening the political power and increasing the exploitation of its own labour.

Each core state, seeking to strengthen its national capital, faces options: it can do so at the expense of domestic labour, at the expense of peripheral countries or at the expense of other core capitalisms. During the 1990s the easy options for the West European states have been the first two (taking full advantage of the weakness of East Central Europe in this context). But the capitalisms of Western Europe are seeking to give themselves other possibilities for the future. Working as a concert of capitalisms (the Eurozone) they are seeking to build a regional shield that will enable them later to resist US capitalism and even to make domestic concessions in the face of a future European labour challenge.

Now the key point is that the entire structure of American capitalism as it has developed during the Cold War actually depends upon a particular global political structure, which we can summarize as the maintenance of a US protectorate over the entire capitalist core. As I tried to argue in my book *The Global Gamble*, this political dominance over the core is what underpins the dominance of the dollar and creates the basis of the dollar-Wall-Street Regime governing international monetary and financial relations. This in turn gives US capitalism the ability to run enormous deficits with the rest of the world, fund its structure of military protectorates and use both military-political and economic statecraft to shape global capital accumulation in US interests. To put it bluntly, this system has meant that if any other core capitalism was to develop a new more advanced range of capital goods to underpin a new wave of accumulation the US can step in and clean up. There is a tendency for Marxists to underplay this political side of international capitalism.

It is in this context that we can see how dangerous it would be for American capitalism if political regionalism developed in Western and Eastern Eurasia. This is not a dangerous economic trend today: Europe, for example, is very accommodating to US business at present. But it could be extremely dangerous tomorrow.

## America's global gamble

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The seeming unity of the capitalist core in 'globalisation' reflects the common neo-liberal assault against labour, the new wave of expansion into the South and also the trend towards 'financialisation', which shouldn't be seen as the dominance of finance capital over industrial capital, but rather the transformation of all major corporations into financial actors, winning large portions of their profits through financial operations. But if you look at the geography of production and ownership you get a different picture: a very strong regionalisation of capital, with each major region - North America, Europe and East Asia - becoming more regionally oriented: 90 per cent of what is consumed within each part of the triad is produced there, and ownership patterns reflect the same thing.

In Europe this production regionalism is combined with strong political regionalism. And in East Asia there are political stirrings in the same direction, strengthened since the East Asian financial crisis and the predatory activity of the US in that crisis. This political trend in East Asia is much more fragile than in Europe (especially because of Chinese-Japanese rivalry over leadership of a trend they both want). US elites are trying to build their own pan-American region while simultaneously the US has been and must battle to reorganize its political-military dominance over Western and Eastern Eurasia.

This is the strategic context in which we must situate the tactics of the Bush administration. And in this context, the strategic continuities of the Bush administration with the Clinton administration become much more obvious. Both have been committed to anchoring direct US global political dominance. The Clinton administration focused, in East Asia, on opening up political economies to US penetration without major military-political moves. Its military-political efforts were concentrated on Europe, using the wars in the Western Balkans to re-establish US military political dominance over pan-Europe, to make the US the gatekeeper between Russia and the EU and to try (without much success) to keep Western Europe fragmented in national hub-and-spokes relations with the US in the military-political field.

At the same time, the Clinton administration tried to legitimate these operations via an economic and mechanical materialist ideology of 'globalisation' plus a liberal cosmopolitan ideology of global human rights and global governance/ global rule of law, global civil society, etc. etc. The problem with that kind of politics was that it produced liberal cosmopolitan blow-back from the EU: the Kyoto regime, the International Criminal Court, a whole raft of legal regimes for arms control, a whole conception of world order based on collegiality and civilian power - perfect for European imperialism.

Bush came in determined to rip all that up. He got off to a rocky start. Despite strong US pressure, Japan signed up to Kyoto, the US was voted off the UN Human Rights Commission (with European support), the ICC moved forward, the EU even intervened against Bush on North Korea, the Europeans deepened links with Iran, continued to block US policy on Iraq along with Russia, started competing for Putin, attacked US policy on Palestine, pressed ahead with its so-called European Security and Defence Policy etc., etc.

But with September 11 and the CAT, Bush has got a new American show on the road. It is about shifting the entire global political agenda onto the terrain where the US is king: the military terrain.

*I was struck by your use of the theories of Carl Schmitt. He was of course a notorious authoritarian rightist, the Nazis' main theorist of jurisprudence. We are seeing something really nasty emerging in the United States, the most reactionary mobilization since McCarthyism in the 1950s. Is liberal democracy under threat?*

The answer is that it depends on what you mean by liberal democracy. In fact, the left paradoxically tends to exaggerate the extent to which labour has been - as they say in the US - 'put back in its box', both in Europe and in the United States.

Look at the situation in Italy. The remarkable thing is that the attempts by Berlusconi to push through reactionary social and economic measures have taken so long and made such little headway - so far. And if you look at the Clinton administration, there was a real attempt to turn the United States in the direction of 'social imperialism', privileging domestic labour over foreign labour. Clinton didn't bow to this in practical policy, but he did in rhetoric. That was the meaning of Clinton's rhetoric about 'labour standards' - labour rights and environmental standards - through the WTO. It was offering to defend US industry and labour against China and South East Asia.

One of the most striking things about US politics in the 1990s was that the hard right, despite their enormous financial and other resources, were unable to effectively build a mass base for themselves. The big new fact in world politics since September 11 is the hope by the hard right and their big business supporters that they've managed to establish a mass base for themselves in the US. But they're not going to get that base by having a huge assault on labour rights. That doesn't preclude of course restrictions on democratic rights with negative effects on minority ethnic communities and dissident political groups. They are, of course, obsessively hostile to the anti-capitalist globalisation movement and there are resources in American political culture for witch-hunt politics against the left, something that could be played in the event of another major strike like September 11.

*What are the main obstacles to American success in its new offensive?*

The first thing which has been obsessing the US foreign policy establishment is the situation in the Indian sub-continent, and the danger of an uncontrollable war between India and Pakistan. This is incredibly dangerous for the US. They have great difficulty stabilizing Pakistan, the kinds of measures that could help in that can destabilize the India-Pakistan relationship.

Second, the big test is Iraq. The US has boxed itself into overthrowing the regime. Can it do it without chaos or worse in the Middle East? If yes, this will be a big US global political victory, especially over the West Europeans. It will also lead to a changed US policy towards Saudi Arabia (the aim being to pull troops out). If no, the US could get into very serious trouble and the whole Bush strategy would come apart.

Third, we should add that the situation in Afghanistan remains risky for the US. It will pay a serious price if this presently fictitious Karzai government openly collapses. And it could also get dragged into a morass in its war activities there.

But the key test will be Iraq. Failure on that will kill the general CAT as a framework for processing US global strategy. The stakes are very high on this. I can't see how they can do it without some sort of prior deal on Israel-Palestine. And even then, the US will have to pay out a lot to a lot of regimes to make the operation possible.

For the West European states the Iraq confrontation is also a big test. Up to now their strategy has been one of subversive bandwagoning with the Americans. They roll with every US punch but then do things to try to increase their cohesion and autonomy from the US. This time the West Europeans could split.

*Don't you think that there's an element of irrationality in sections of the US leadership? For example the declaration that the US is prepared to use nuclear weapons to kill Saddam Hussein. Or the idea that they might use their new military positions in central Asia to attack China at some point in the future?*

I think it's important we appreciate why these outbursts of barbaric militarism occur. Part of this is panic and deep anxieties. The first anxiety is that there will be another major terrorist attack on the United States; and the fear that if that happens there will be a current emerging in the United States which says "since September 11 you have done nothing whatever to defend American citizens, in fact you have made the situation worse".

The second anxiety is that before September 11, and subsequently, the United States has been in an extremely exposed position over its Middle East policy, and they are desperately worried about developments there. The way that they cope with this is all kinds of threats and bellicosity, much of it bluff.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/Wolfowitz.gif>]

You have to bear in mind that the Bush team comes directly from Reaganism; it is the Reaganite wing of the American political establishment. And it's noticeable that many of them are from a military background - for example, the two top people at the State department, Powell and Armitage, are from the military. The same is true of Cheney - a civilian expert on things military - and of Wolfowitz. (Clinton's geopoliticians were from the Brzezinski side of the Carter administration and they, of course, in many ways launched military-political Reaganism in 1978-9, so no big difference) These people are intoxicated by what they think is the political efficacy of military power. They really don't have much experience of coping with explosive mass politics. This is a weakness.

Secondly, their big experience was against the USSR. Now the USSR was extremely cautious militarily and politically. And it also, as a matter of fact, shared a great deal of what might be called political values and political culture with the West if viewed in comparative historical terms. That is not true of some of their present enemies. Thus, when Bush included North Korea in 'axis of evil' he was taking a real risk with Kim Jong Il who can be jumpy and adventurist militarily. The same is also true of some of the people in the Pakistani intelligence forces; anyone who delves a bit deeper into the Pearl assassination, in which the Pakistani intelligence people were almost certainly involved, can see that. And the problem with military power is that its calculable political efficacy is greatest when it is not actually used. But once it is used, it unleashes new dynamics of its own which are not only often unpredictable but also uncontrollable.

And thirdly, despite the big new fact of mass American support for external military action, the US still has very limited capacity to militarily operate on the ground, directly controlling populations. Its efforts to do so in Afghanistan on any scale have not been impressive. Proxy forces plus special operations teams remains the limit for sustained population control US action.

But in another way, US military-political power is still overwhelmingly an instrument for influencing other states. For directly controlling the world's population, the US relies on these other states to do the job. It can't risk going onto the ground and doing much 'state building' or 'nation building' itself. Blair, of course, presents Britain as the loyal servant in this field but this is fundamentally a bluff. As the French say, the British may be the first in but they are also the first out in places like Macedonia or Afghanistan. Can we envisage the Europeans eagerly state-building in Baghdad amidst the carnage of a war against Saddam? Or how about the Turks, 'liberating' the Kurds?

And more generally a United States relying on other states for population control while bludgeoning these other states with its military might has to confront the fact that the world's populations do not like this kind of American behaviour. They consider it to be illegitimate or even terroristic. And states do control their populations by partially reflecting their views. This is a very big long-term problem for US geopolitics.

*How do you see the prospects for the left in the current situation?*

The anti-capitalist globalisation movement has suffered a setback as a result of September 11 because it was united largely on issues of international social and economic policy rather than on a programme on key issues of world political order. Thus while no wing of the movement was in any way sympathetic to the methods of overall aims of those involved in September 11, the movement was not politically prepared to take on the Bush Afghan war and Campaign against Terrorism.

As a result it has suffered a very serious setback in the United States and indeed, though less severe, elsewhere. To be honest, a principled, egalitarian social liberalism should be prepared to embrace all the main social policy goals of the movement, but they could simultaneously have serious cognitive illusions about the nature of the American state and about the real goals and consequences of the Afghan war or a war against Iraq. Within a liberal perspective, you may see multinational companies as the source of the problem and may see Western states as basically expressions of popular will, even if skewed somewhat by undue corporate influence.

There are thus widespread illusions on the efficacy and legitimacy of military aggression by Western states. Nobody on the left in any way supports the Taliban state in Afghanistan. But many left liberals in the West think it does not matter very much who or what destroys that Taliban government and state. Some think anything would be better than the Taliban or Saddam or Milosevic. Others think that if the West bombs out the government and puts in Western agents plus some money for 'state-building' or 'nation-building' and development this will be an advance for the population. All this is in general rubbish. It is a cardinal political principle that authoritarian governments must be defeated by social forces within the given country if there is to be any hope of positive political development.

At the same time, the actions and rhetoric of the Bush administration have produced a profound ideological shock to liberal and social democrats in very many parts of the world: there is genuine alarm at the naked drive for world domination without the slightest regard for international law. This provides an audience for the internationalist, anti-imperialist left. But it is also a challenge because it is capturable very easily by the liberal-legalist diplomacy of the EU with its concept of world order. This says we want a world ruled by law not by arbitrary force. We want to punish the wrong-doers but to stay ourselves within international law. And we want to use force only as a last resort, not a first resort.

But this line of argument is utterly specious for one very simple reason: the nature of international law. It is nothing other than the past codified policy of the dominant capitalist states. It has no popular democratic source of legitimacy whatever. And this applies also to the United Nations structure as it is actually constituted. We should not forget that this structure gives virtually untrammelled power to the five permanent members when they are united and unlimited blocking power to each of them individually.

The EU's diplomacy is a lesser evil than that of the US in their common effort to keep their dominance over the south where most of the world's population lives. But it is a lesser evil only because it has little military capacity or militarist stomach (outside Britain and France). So it prefers the methods of economic statecraft and that kind of coercion. And the UN structure also lacks a principled basis of authority. Only the UN idea of the nations of the world actually uniting and deliberating through their representatives with due weight for the population size of countries - only the actualisation of that idea could give us a really authoritative body for 'laying down the law' internationally. In such a body the left should accept the official representatives of states.

It should not, for example, question the fact that the Blair government was elected by 24% of the British electorate or that the US Congress was bought and paid for by over \$700 million of corporate funding or that the Chinese communist party leadership emerged from a system different from the British or American one. All such issues should be tackled by domestic forces in the country concerned. Genuine global democrats should accept the will of the genuine international community of nations. But they should not accept the nauseating imperial cant of Blair's nonsense about 'the international community'.

After September 11, the Left must address these issues of the global political order and begin campaigning for a positive, principled basis for a legitimate global political order, while repudiating both the ludicrous (and sinister) US idea that it should rule the world and the scarcely less ludicrous idea that the G7 or OECD capitalism should, presumably because of their wealth and greed, be considered the 'international community'.



*Well that is easier said than done; it won't happen without lots of big developments in the world of labour, without the results of many partial struggles beginning to create a new situation. But in that context you can see many positive signs, like the developments in Italy or the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre with 70,000 people, even after September 11.*

I agree. And on that topic let me say that I think it's crucial that the World Social Forum process and links, which so far seem to have been strongest in Europe and the Americas, are pushed into East Asia and especially into the labour movement in East Asia. That's going to be a crucial strategic task for the left in the coming period. The emergence, which is just beginning with new left and unions organizations in the Philippines, Indonesia and South Korea, of a powerful, independent and radical workers' movement in these countries would be a tremendous factor in starting to shift the relationship of forces.

And of course, links also with labour in Japan and above all within China. The Chinese people, such a huge part of humanity, are coming onto the world stage. They face great dangers from the United States and great tests as China manoeuvres as it must in the regimes of the world economy, as well as great domestic upheavals and crossroads. If the forces around the World Social Forum could link up with gigantic potential powers of labour in that part of the world not only the Bin Ladens of this world but also the political capacity of US military hardware would appear in a rather different perspective!