

War in the Era of Declining U.S. Global Hegemony

Francis Shor

While Clausewitz's perspective that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means' is widely quoted, the full implications of that perspective are rarely explored. What I propose to highlight in this essay is how the imperial political projects of the United States in the post-Vietnam era unleashed direct and indirect regional war strategies from Latin America to the Middle East. The essay will highlight, in particular, the wide variety of such strategies from covert intervention in Chile to proxy wars in Central America to military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Attempting to re-assert its global hegemony after Vietnam, the U.S. became more committed to perpetrating war as an instrument of its global posture. Of course, relying on war strategies, whether through direct or indirect interventions, complicates, if not confounds, the imposition of global hegemony.

Although the emergence of the United States as a global hegemon had roots in national and international conditions prior to World War II, that war provided the U.S. with the historical opportunity to establish its global hegemony. U.S. global hegemony was not only a consequence of economic, political, and military domination, but also a reflection of the diffusion of cultural and ideological values that advanced the role of the United States as a controlling power in the world. Hence, the U.S. assumed the mantle of legitimacy, wrapped in the cloak of hegemony with its ideological presumptions that "U.S. global dominance was...the natural result of historical progress..., rather than the competitive outcome of political-economic power" (Smith, N., 2003, p. 20).¹

Convinced that they were beyond the reproach of history and the owners of the future, postwar U.S. policymakers and their ideological advocates sought to establish U.S. pre-eminence in the world by both overt and covert means. Among the overt designs was the development of numerous international and multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Such institutional arrangements reinforced and expanded U.S. hegemony. The covert means, deployed when coercion needed to trump a particular ideological consensus,

focused primarily on the role of the newly created Central Intelligence Agency to foster favorable political arrangements and to underwrite cultural enterprises during the Cold War. Although U.S. interventions and regime change had predated the operationalization of U.S. global hegemony, those foreign adventures increased in the developing world during the Cold War through what critics have called “stealth imperialism,” becoming, in turn, even more frequent, open, and brazen after the fall of the Berlin Wall.²

There can be no doubt that a more emboldened imperialism and militarism have been the hallmarks of recent U.S. geopolitical strategy. Carl Boggs has traced that ‘revitalized U.S. imperialism and militarism’ to a number of factors: “a growing mood of American exceptionalism in international affairs, the primacy of military force in U.S. policy, arrogation of the right to intervene around the world, the spread of xenophobic patriotism, [and] further consolidation of the permanent war system” (2005, p. x).³ However, as acknowledged by Boggs and other critics of U.S. imperialism, such imperialism and militarism not only exacerbate and/or even create local insurgencies, but constant saber-rattling by the U.S. also produces global resistance, such as the massive world-wide mobilization of millions that occurred on the eve of the U.S. military invasion of Iraq in February 2003. In effect, the pursuit of imperial dominance through geopolitical militarism and war contains contradictions that further undermine hegemony abroad and legitimacy at home, reinforcing, in the process, a crisis of empire.

Yet, in reviewing the last several decades of U.S. foreign policy, especially in Latin America and the Middle East, it is clear that the ruling elite in Washington continue to believe in their right to determine the fate of others. In fact, the policies enacted by the decision-makers in DC have become even more harried and brutal in light of those others who have the temerity to exercise their right of self-determination. In the aftermath of the crushing defeat in Vietnam and the crisis of legitimacy confronting ruling circles in the U.S., imperial policy suffered some setbacks, including the erosion of the prerogatives of the imperial presidency with the congressional passage in 1973 of the War Powers Act. Nonetheless, neither presidents nor the Pentagon felt constrained by the congressional restrictions, even though the pursuit of geopolitical military strategies varied to a certain degree depending on the soft or hard imperialist policy adopted by particular presidents. However, in Latin America, the bipartisan tradition of intervention often obliterated those differences.

The continuity of Washington’s support for counterinsurgency and covert intervention in Latin America was evident in the sponsorship of paramilitary and military death squads in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala during the presidencies of both Kennedy and Reagan. While Kennedy’s support for such death squads was ostensibly as a counter to the influence of Castro-like revolutions, Reagan’s support was a more aggressive rollback of any attempt by Latin American governments

to stake out an independent policy from U.S. imperial dominance. As argued by historian Greg Grandin, "It was Central America, and Latin America more broadly, where an insurgent New Right first coalesced, as conservative activists used the region to respond to the crisis of the 1970's, a crisis provoked not only by America's defeat in Vietnam but by a deep economic recession and a culture of skeptical antimilitarism and political dissent that spread in the war's wake" (2007, p. 5).⁴

The roots of the crisis, I want to suggest, can also be traced to the policies of the Nixon Administration in its efforts to reorder the economic and geopolitical global framework. As a consequence of the inflationary spiral unleashed by immense spending on the war in Indochina, Nixon abandoned the Bretton Woods agreements, going off the gold standard and allowing the U.S. dollar to float. The long-term implication of this "dollar diplomacy" was profound not only for the emergence of U.S. led casino capitalism, with its attendant third world indebtedness, but also for the primacy of petro-dollars and the impact on capital and oil flows through the Middle East.⁵ However, in more immediate geopolitical terms, Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor, adopted a strategy of *détente* that privileged big-power and bi-polar politics while threatening to crush any deviance from allegiances to the two dominant ideological camps. Thus, any attempt by those in Latin America or elsewhere to seek a path outside of the U.S. or Soviet orbit was considered a direct challenge to this imperial framework.

In particular, Nixon and Kissinger committed the U.S. to do everything possible to derail the reform government of Salvador Allende in Chile. From the outset of the election of Allende in 1970, Nixon instructed the CIA to organize campaigns of economic subversion and to foster ties to right-wing elements in the Chilean military. Coordinating a vast array of U.S. business interests that had a financial stake in eliminating Allende and various other governmental agencies that could penetrate civil society in Chile, Kissinger oversaw an extensive covert operation to "destabilize" Chile. According to one of Kissinger's staff on the National Security Council, Kissinger "saw Allende as being a far more serious threat than Castro. If Latin America ever became unraveled, it would never happen with a Castro. Allende was a living example of democratic social reform in Latin America ... Chile scared him" (Quoted in Grandin, 2007, p. 60).⁶ The dogged and devious actions employed by the Nixon Administration paid off on September 11, 1973 when the military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, overthrew and murdered not only Allende, but thousands of other Chileans. Accompanying these tragic deaths was the eradication of any reform possibilities and the institutionalization of an ideologically rigid version of "free market" capitalism, designated by Naomi Klein as an economic "shock doctrine" (2007, esp. pp. 75-87).

The overthrow of the Allende government did not, however, impede efforts by others in Latin America from backing insurgencies against unpopular and

dictatorial governments. In this regard the victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979 demonstrated that U.S. favored dictators, like the Somozas, could not hold back a revolutionary upsurge when it permeated broad sectors of support. Although the Carter Administration tried to forestall the Sandinistas from coming to power, it was the Reagan Administration that committed itself to doing everything in its power to destroy the potential for the success of Sandinista reforms. Those reforms, aimed in particular at the rural and urban poor, not only overturned decades of elite rule in Nicaragua but also defied the cozy client relationships that the U.S. counted on as part of their imperial dominance in all of Central America. It is not surprising, therefore, that U.S. opponents of the Sandinistas were as blunt about what was at stake in Nicaragua. "Washington believes," pontificated a conservative church advocate for the Reagan Administration, "that Nicaragua must serve as a warning to the rest of Central America to never again challenge U.S. hegemony, because of the enormous economic and political costs. It's too bad that the [Nicaraguan] poor must suffer, but historically the poor have always suffered. Nicaragua must be a lesson to others" (quoted in Robinson, 1996, p. 201).⁷

While the key to undermining the Sandinista government was sponsoring the Contras, a collection of remnants from Somoza's national guard who, with the encouragement of Reagan operatives, wrecked havoc on the country while murdering and torturing Sandinista supporters, the U.S. also pursued a strategy of influencing civil society in order to support and foster political opposition to the Sandinistas. Forced initially into covert campaigns against the Sandinistas because of active domestic opposition from religious and peace groups and their allies in Congress, the Reagan Administration pursued a wide range of activities from economic embargoes to illicit fund-raising and arms brokering (embodied in the notorious Iran-Contra networks) to the internationally condemned mining of Nicaraguan harbors. At the same time, under the guise of "democracy promotion," the Sandinista government was kept under siege, losing, in the process, much of its capacity to deliver on its promises. Although the machinations of the Reagan Administration did face resolute opposition by the Sandinistas, its international supporters, and U.S. based solidarity networks, such as Witness for Peace, the Reagan Administration eventually managed to bleed Nicaragua and to alienate its besieged population into abandoning the Sandinista government.⁸

While the bleeding in Nicaragua was, as a consequence of so-called low-intensity conflict, insidious but steady, the blood-letting in El Salvador and Guatemala was more evident and massive during the 1980s. In order to stem the growth of guerilla movements in these two countries, the Reagan Administration relied on supporting atrocious counterinsurgency regimes and their special military forces. Among these was the vicious U.S. trained Atlacatl Battalion whose 1981 massacre in the Salvadoran town of El Mozote resulted in the brutal execution of over 750 inhabitants including

women and children. Between the years 1981 and 1983 the Guatemalan military executed over 100,000 indigenous peasants who were alleged to be guerilla supporters and, therefore, deserving of the murderous rage of the military. According to Greg Grandin, "U.S. allies in Central America during Reagan's two terms killed over 300,000 people, tortured hundreds of thousands, and drove millions into exile" (2007, p. 71).⁹

While outsourcing of imperial violence and war to military or paramilitary regimes in Latin America gained certain prominence as a strategy in re-asserting U.S. dominance in the region, there were moments when outright U.S. military intervention was deemed necessary. When erstwhile ally and CIA protégé, Manuel Noriega, began to insist that Panama be given full control over the Panama Canal with the possible construction by Japan of another canal, President George H. W. Bush ordered 26,000 U.S. troops to invade the country with the ostensible purpose of overthrowing Noriega. In the process, with the indiscriminate bombing of Panama City, thousands of Panamanian civilians were killed. Calling the military operation "Just Cause" only further revealed the hypocrisy of a government whose Secretaries of Defense and State, Casper Weinberger and George Shultz, respectively, had been former executives of the American construction company, Bechtel, whose business interests in canal building would suffer.¹⁰ Beyond this direct and crude instrumental connection, the invasion provided exemplary evidence that the U.S. President would not hesitate to use direct military force in order to prove that they had the right to intervene militarily. As argued by Greg Grandin, "Just Cause not only broke with Washington's decades-long policy of delegating hemispheric administration to Latin American surrogates but also facilitated the gearing up of the Pentagon for its mobilization in the first Gulf War" (2007, p. 192).

Although the Pentagon would not launch its attack until January 1991, President George H. W. Bush would be provided with a rationale by Saddam Hussein to go to war against Iraq in the summer of 1990. Hussein had been an ally and even CIA asset going back to the Baath Party's coup in 1963 against the then left-wing Iraqi government. During the long war between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988), the Reagan Administration had tilted heavily towards Iraq, equipping Hussein with the very chemical weapons and dual use technology that was later used as a basis for enacting sanctions in the 1990's and for ideological posturing by the Bush Junior Administration. Even after the Iraq-Iran War ended, Saddam Hussein received favored treatment by Washington, despite very evident human rights abuses, especially against the Kurds in northern Iraq. When Iraq massed tens of thousands of troops along the border with Kuwait in July 1990 as a response to Kuwaiti drilling under Iraqi territory and Kuwait's undercutting of OPEC's set price for crude oil, the U.S. response, conveyed by Ambassador April Glaspie, was that Iraq was justified in seeking to protect its oil production and pricing. On the specific confrontation with Kuwait concerning border matters, Ambassador Glaspie indicated that the U.S. had "no

opinion.” Viewing this as a “green light” for an invasion, the Iraqi military steamed across the border a week later. As a consequence of that invasion and despite months of attempted open and back-door diplomacy, undermined constantly by the Bush Administration, the U.S. built up a massive military presence in the region. After having achieved a degree of international and national consensus over Hussein’s actions in Kuwait, actions distorted by Administration propaganda and mainstream media manipulation, the United States, with several allies, most significantly Great Britain, attacked Iraq on January 16, 1991.¹¹

The ensuing Gulf War was not just a case of playing international sheriff at the head of an organized posse confronting a universally-recognized outlaw. Although clearly a reflection of U.S. bipartisan imperial policy in the region with its obsession with oil flows and the “special relationship” with Israel, the war on Iraq had multiple motivations from diverting attention from domestic crises to satisfying the demands of the insatiable military-industrial complex. That complex, in particular, with the fall of the Soviet Union, required new enemies to justify continuing extravagant expenditures for the Pentagon. Furthermore, the Pentagon and the National Security State were especially obsessed with overcoming what had been called the “Vietnam syndrome,” a national reluctance to commit the military to extended geopolitical interventions. Yet, ironically, as noted by Douglas Kellner, what transpired in the Gulf War “was a classic expression of the Vietnam syndrome, of a militarist compulsion to use U.S. military power to resolve political conflicts” (1992, p. 386). In order to build a consensus among a divided nation and Congress before the war, the Bush Administration and a compliant corporate media had painted Hussein as another Hitler, menacing not only the region but the whole world. “Against the ‘evil’ Hussein and threatening Iraqis, the media thus posed images of the ‘good’ American soldier and powerful U.S. technology. In the nightly repetition of these positive images of U.S. troops valiantly protecting a foreign country from aggression, the need for a strong military was repeatedly pounded into the public’s psyche” (Kellner, 1992, p. 72).

While the American public rallied behind its troops, the rest of the world saw the vicious unleashing of technowar, a form of high-tech slaughter that did much to erode any legitimacy claimed by the Bush Administration for its war-making efforts. This was most evident in the massacre of retreating Iraqis from Kuwait on what became known as the “Highway of Death.” Although the U.S. media was highly controlled by the military, images of this massacre did find some fleeting moments in television reporting. CNN showed the vehicular and human carnage littering the road from Kuwait City to the Iraq border. Nonetheless, CNN, at least for its U.S. audience, framed the devastation as just retribution against Iraqi torturers and thieves. Yet, it was clear to other reporters that this fleeing convoy of conscripts and civilians had been repeatedly bombarded by U.S. warplanes using cluster bombs and antipersonnel weapons. Even British military officials decried this slaughter, bridleing at how U.S.

pilots had boasted about their participation in what they called "The Turkey Shoot" (Kellner, 1992, pp. 404-408).

While the brutal results of technowar and the political equivocation of the Bush Administration concerning the invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Hussein undermined its claims of moral legitimacy for its actions, the prosecution of the Gulf War also demonstrated the awful long-term physical damage to civilians, soldiers, and the environment of the whole Gulf region. In particular, the use by the Pentagon of depleted uranium, a radioactive substance intended to harden tank and war plane projectiles, caused irreparable harm to all those in the immediate bombardment area. In the Gulf War, according to Professor Doug Rokke, an ex-director of the Pentagon's Depleted Uranium Project, "well over 300 tons were fired. An A-10 Warthog attack aircraft fired over 900,000 rounds. Each individual round was 300 grams of solid uranium 238. When a tank fired its shells, each round carried over 4,500 grams of solid uranium. ... What happened in the Gulf was a form of nuclear warfare" (quoted in Pilger, 2002, p. 49). That nuclear warfare contaminated tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians and even U.S. soldiers, giving rise to increased amounts of cancer among Iraqi children and increased levels of disabilities in Gulf War veterans and deformities in their children. Even though eventually condemned by the United Nations as a weapon of mass destruction, depleted uranium remained in the Pentagon's arsenal and was used extensively in the 1999 bombing campaign by the U.S. in the Balkans.¹²

Beyond the long-term effects of depleted uranium, U.S. policy in Iraq during the 1990s continued a state of war on the country with the use of periodic bombing runs and the imposition of economic sanctions, both lacking in international support with the notable exception of British government. Clinton's hard-line position on these air incursions and the controversial sanctions, estimated by numerous human rights agencies to have resulted in as many as a half-million deaths of mostly vulnerable children under the age of 5 years old, did little to dislodge Saddam Hussein from power but much to harm the Iraqi civilian population. According to Denis Halliday, the U. N. humanitarian coordinator who resigned in disgust over the continuing sanctions, "We are in the process of destroying an entire society. It is as simple and as terrifying as that" (quoted in Pilger, 2002, p. 53).¹³ This slow bleeding of Iraqi society, justified by Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, as "worth it," was, however, not enough for the neo-conservatives in the Project for a New American Century who, in their 1998 letter to Clinton, pushed for a removal of Hussein's regime. Arguing that "American policy cannot continue to be crippled by a misguided insistence on unanimity in the U. N. Security Council," these neo-cons would come to power in the disputed election of George W. Bush in 2000. Sidestepping the U. N. Security Council after failing to achieve a majority vote for its invasion of Iraq, the Bush Administration shifted to a unilateralism based on "coercion rather than consent, towards a more overly imperial vision, and towards reliance upon its unchallengeable

military power” (Harvey, 2005, p. 75).¹⁴

Although that military power had first been deployed in Afghanistan, supposedly in response to the Taliban’s support for Osama bin Laden, the history of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and the actual prosecution of the war once more demonstrated the duplicity and devastation of an imperial policy that sought domination in an era of waning hegemony. That policy, originally rooted in Cold War gamesmanship, had its covert conception in 1979 with the CIA supporting Afghan warlords and Muslim guerillas fighting against a communist sponsored government in Kabul. Working in the 1980s with the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, the Reagan Administration began funding those Muslim fundamentalists most favored by the ISI, included among them, Osama bin Laden. When an even more virulent fundamentalist group, the Taliban, began to achieve prominence in the guerilla war in the 1990’s, the U.S. under Clinton continued its support out of the desire, among other reasons, to help U.S. oil companies construct a pipeline that would avoid going through Iran.¹⁵

The key U.S. oil company involved in these dealings with the Taliban and other reactionary governments in Central Asia was Unocal. Unocal had been actively engaged in doing business with repressive regimes throughout the world in their search for oil and natural gas reserves. From connections to military dictatorships in Burma and Indonesia, Unocal spread its oily tentacles throughout the third world. Having been part of a consortium of U.S. oil firms exploring potential gas and oil reserves in Central Asia, Unocal turned its attention to Afghanistan in the 1990’s. Not averse to doing business with the Taliban, Unocal unsuccessfully tried to induce the Taliban as late as the summer of 2001 into making a deal for a major oil pipeline across the country. When talks broke down, there were rumblings in Washington that the Taliban would have to make way for a more pliable government.¹⁶ Conveniently for the militarist-minded and oil-obsessed Bush Administration, bin Laden had located in Afghanistan. Inconveniently for the Afghan people and even former CIA Afghan allies, the Bush Administration needed to wage a demonstration war in Afghanistan that did more than seek retribution against bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

What has been pursued by the United States in Afghanistan is a form of punitive imperialism that, on one hand, rhetorically claims to be about precision bombing but, in reality, is about killing without remorse. Over the first year and continuing up to this very moment, various reports of bombings of wedding parties and family gatherings in Afghan villages have accumulated. One such example happened in a village north of Kandahar which was strafed by AC-130 gunships, resulting in the death of at least 93 civilians. The blunt response by one Pentagon official was that “the people were dead because we wanted them dead.” Trying to avoid any further probing of the incident, then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld said, “I cannot deal with that particular village.” In a June 28, 2002 *Los Angeles Times*

story about such civilian deaths, one Afghan who had lost his wife, mother, and seven children in the U.S. bombing run of his village, angrily lamented: "I put a curse on the Americans who did this. I pray they will have the tragedy in their lives that I have had in mine." Given such indiscriminate killing, it should not be surprising that U.S. policy in Afghanistan has only succeeded in re-legitimizing a guerilla insurgency, led by a renewed Taliban, creating further tragedies for the Afghan people and U.S. imperial policy.¹⁷

That imperial policy, awash in continuing delusions about the antiseptic precision of U.S. technology and the righteousness of using state terror to punish rogue terrorists, whether ensconced in national regimes or stateless insurgencies, remains a constant of U.S. geopolitical strategy irrespective of the tactical differences in presidential prerogatives. Basking in the short-lived success of the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, President Bush applauded the "new powers of technology" that allowed the U.S. "to strike an enemy force with speed and incredible precision. By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technologies, we are redefining war on our terms" (quoted in Bacevich, 2008, p. 127).¹⁸ The imperial hubris expressed in such wishful thinking informs fundamental geopolitical thinking for superpowers like the United States and its Middle East strategic ally, Israel, especially in their callous disregard and arrogant rationalizations for "collateral damage," i.e., devastation of civilian populations. As noted in the following discussion of the parallels of geopolitical military strategy for the U.S. and Israel, "the distinction between civilian and military targets and casualties has been obliterated, collective punishment has become accepted practice, and grotesquely disproportionate response to acts of resistance (think Fallujah and Gaza) has become the hallmark not only of the Israeli Defense Forces but also of "America under siege." All resistance is terrorism. All state violence is self-defense" (Retort, 2006, pp. 123-125).¹⁹

Thus, a geopolitical strategy for global dominance becomes obsessed with any global resistance that defies imperial prerogatives. As argued by Ira Chernus, "changes anywhere in the world that would challenge U.S. hegemony spell chaos and constant alarm" (2006, p. 202). According to Chernus, part of the process of seeking global dominance results in seeing and, even, of creating monsters to slay. Although the morphing of those monsters from communists to terrorists marks certain discursive changes, U.S. imperial policy is remarkably consistent, irrespective of ideological shadings. One of the last Defense Department directives to be issued by the Bush Administration found support from President Obama with the assertion that for the "foreseeable future, winning the Long War against violent extremists will be the central objective of U.S. policy." Wedded to what can only be construed as permanent war, U.S. imperial policy garners such consensus precisely because empire has become an American way of life. A variation on this theme that puts the Long War into the long trajectory of U.S. imperialism is the following formulation by Andrew Bacevich: "the

Long War genuinely qualifies as a war to preserve the American way of life ... and simultaneously as a war to extend the American imperium (centered on dreams of a world re-made in America's image), the former widely assumed to require the latter" (2008, pp. 11 and 79-80).

While the Long War builds on the deep roots of U.S. imperial militarism, it also becomes the most recent articulation of the search for global dominance. That global dominance relies heavily on the forward positioning of military power throughout the world, but especially in areas laden with oil and other precious resources essential to the perpetuation of U.S. hegemony. However, while there may be an economic connection between U.S. imperial policy and the geopolitics of the extension of U.S. military power, it is important to understand how that imperial militarism has an inherent logic that drives its thrust for global dominance. Certainly, if not yet recognized by the American public, others in those strategically significant parts of the world readily understand how the presence of the U.S. military, in whatever guise, embodies the search, whether illusive or not, for global dominance. According to the Indian activist and writer, Arundhati Roy, "It's become clear that the War against Terror is not really about terror, and the War on Iraq not only about oil. It's about a superpower's self-destructive impulse toward supremacy, stranglehold, global hegemony" (2004, p. 34).

While it is true, to a certain extent, that transnational capital performs global functions unbound by the nation state, the calculus by which the United States attempts to exercise global dominance and hegemony is firmly rooted in its practice of military imperialism and war. In fact, at some level, one could agree with the formulation by Emmanuel Todd that the United States "is battling to maintain its status as the world's financial center by making a symbolic show of its military might in the heart of Eurasia, thereby hoping to forget and have others ignore America's industrial weakness, its financial need, and its predatory character" (2003, p. xviii.). For Todd, the U.S. has lost its hegemony and can only flaunt its "theatrical micromilitarism' through the 'war on terrorism" (2003, pp. 134 and 202). Other critics, like Samir Amin, are less sanguine about the disappearance of U.S. hegemony although its expression, noting the similarity with Todd's perspective, "rests far more on its excessive military power than on the advantages of its economic system" (2004, p. 76). He goes on to remark that the "fight against the imperialism of the United States and its militarist option is everyone's – its major victims in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the Japanese and European peoples condemned to subordination, even the North American people" (2004, p. 83). In *Beyond U.S. Hegemony*, Amin looks to ways of creating "Solidarity in the South" as a potential and real alternative to U.S. imperialism (2006, pp. 84-11).

A number of analysts of the new imperialism of the United States, such as Gilbert Achar, have pointed to the demise of the Soviet Union as the historical

moment when the United States took advantage of its “unipolar military domination” to seek ‘a historically unprecedented, global political hegemony” (2006, p. 97). Yet, the following questions posed by Andrew Bacevich seem not to have fully sunk in, especially in light of continuing efforts to assert global dominance and hegemony. Bacevich queries: “How is it that our widely touted post-Cold War military supremacy has produced not enhanced security but the prospect of open-ended conflict? Why is it that when we flex our muscles on behalf of peace and freedom, the world beyond our borders becomes all the more cantankerous and disorderly?” (2008, p. 156). While acknowledging the significance of unipolarity and the asymmetrical power that certain political forces in the United States sought to take advantage of, Gary Dorrien’s study of those neo-conservatives political forces also underscores the continuing delusions shared by rulers and ruled alike about exceptionalism and the denial of the long trajectory of U.S. imperialism (2004, pp. 18-22, 223, and *passim*). Nonetheless, the ramping up of militarization for the purposes of imperial dominance abroad and certain legitimacy at home does pose a fundamental contradiction as well as question. As propounded by Carl Boggs, “If global domination requires broad and firm popular support within the matrix of a stable ... corporate economy, then heavy reliance on military force ... is ultimately counterproductive. If demilitarization of U.S. foreign policy (and society) is the more rational strategy, the problem is that militarism has become so endemic to American society as a whole ... that it will be very difficult to reverse” (2005, p. 207).

Another very real dilemma for U.S. military imperialism and their global strategies, particularly as a consequence of the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, is imperial overstretch. Both in terms of the eventual costs, estimated in the trillions of dollars just in the case of the war on Iraq, and the continuing drain on military personnel, these wars have further underscored the inherent contradictions of U.S. military imperialism and its war strategies. Even with active troops, counting the National Guard and Reserves, numbering over 2 million, the U.S. military has so depleted its human resources that it has resorted to extending tours in ways that have lowered morale and created even more internal dissent about deployment. Attempts to offset these problems by higher pay inducements, expansion of the numbers, and use of private contractors have only exacerbated the overall contradictions endemic in maintaining the kind of global garrison embodied by U.S. military imperialism. According to world-systems scholar Giovanni Arrighi, besides having “jeopardized the credibility of U.S. military might,” the war and occupation of Iraq may be one of the key components underlying the “terminal crisis of U.S. hegemony,” albeit without diminishing the U.S. role as “the world’s pre-eminent military power” (2005, p. 80). Nonetheless, as pointed out by other scholars (Johnson, 2004; Mann, 2003; Wallerstein, 2003), imperial overstretch was central to the demise of previous empires and now threatens the death of a U.S. empire also bent on fighting debilitating and

self-destructive wars.

Clearly, the pursuit of such wars also engenders resistance abroad and potential dissent at home, the latter, however, contingent on some fundamental understanding of the whys and wherefores of prosecuting war. Certainly, resistance to a militarized U.S. foreign policy is evident in various guises, from local insurgencies to global protests. Irrespective of the form such resistance may take, including insurgencies that engage in terror, the U.S. will encounter resistance as long as it insists on imposing its sense of order in the world. In effect, a “system of global domination resting largely on military force, or even the threat of force, cannot in the greater scheme of things consolidate its rule on a foundation of legitimating beliefs on values” (Boggs, 2005, p. 178). On the other hand, U.S. perception of that resistance, whether by the ruling elite, corporate media, or the public at large, is filtered through an ideological smokescreen that either labels that resistance as “terrorism” or some primitive form of know-nothing anti-Americanism. Part of the inability to recognize the reality of what shapes the lives of others is the persistence of a self-image of U.S. benevolence or innocence, even in the face of the realities spawned by U.S. intervention and occupation.²⁰ Also, what remains both contentious and difficult to face is the degree to which the United States, especially in its pursuit of global dominance through military imperialism, has become, to quote Walter Hixson, a “warfare state, a nation with a propensity for initiating and institutionalizing warfare” (2008, p. 14). For Hixson the perpetuation of that warfare state requires reaffirming a national identity whose cultural hegemony at home can provide ideological cover for “nation building, succoring vicious regimes, bombing shelling, contaminating, torturing and killing hundreds of thousands of innocents, and destroying enemy others” (2008, p. 304).

As the bodies pile up, however, the ability to maintain hegemony abroad and even at home is eroded. Yet, war, as a political strategy, remains a compulsive choice by those elite forces in the United States waging a losing struggle to retain global hegemony. As argued by one fierce critic of U.S. military imperialism: “All presidents, whether Democrats or Republicans, have sought to shape the contours of politics worldwide. This global mission and fascination with military power has entangled [U.S.] priorities and stretched its resources over and over again” (Kolko, 2006, p. 95). Although imperial overstretch is even more pronounced in the aftermath of the recent world-wide economic crisis and the proliferation of conflicts in new regions, the fundamental bi-partisan commitment by the political elite to exercising, in the words of President Barack Obama, “global leadership” will continue (quoted in Bacevich, 2008, pp. 79-80).

Of course, there will be nuances in the exercise of that global leadership. Given the massive violations of international and U.S. laws by the Bush Administration, from abrogation of the Geneva Conventions to renditions to torture

and domestic spying, it is not surprising to see President Obama repudiating some of the most egregious policies while retaining others. Although the adoption of these positions by President Obama is certainly part of the restoration of U.S. standing, and, hence, hegemony in the international arena, this new administration is wedded to prosecuting war aggressively in Afghanistan with the expansion of U.S. troops and in Pakistan with increasing attacks by U.S. drones and forays by U.S. Special Forces.

The imperatives of U.S. imperialism, especially military geopolitical strategies, sustain the global garrisoning of U.S. troops while facilitating the predatory spread of private contractors, and protecting the oil and gas regions of the Middle East, Central Asia, and increasingly in the Horn of Africa and Western Africa. This deployment continues even in the face of rising Chinese commercial influence in these aforementioned regions. Pentagon budgets, even under Obama, continue to expand, incurring massive deficits and reinforcing imperial overstretch. Not only critics of U.S. imperialism and its attendant world-system, like Arrighi and Wallerstein, have noted the inevitable decline of hegemony, but also the 2008 National Intelligence Council's "Global Trends 2025" has projected that "the United States relative strength – even in the military realm – will decline and U.S. leverage will become more constrained" (Cited in Klare, 2008). The question remains whether the United States can be made, either by internal contradictions or external antagonisms, to relinquish its foolish and lethal efforts to retain global dominance and hegemony through the pursuit of war and its attendant geopolitical military strategies.

Notes

¹ On the emergence of the United States as a global hegemon, see Hunt (2007).

² For a description and analysis of "stealth imperialism," see Johnson (2000, pp. 65-94). On the long history of regime changes engineered by the United States and the CIA, see Kinzer (2006).

³ Both Boggs (2005) and Bacevich (2008) note the centrality of a renewed and revised American exceptionalism in recent U.S. geopolitical military strategies.

⁴ For his discussion of the support for counterinsurgency and paramilitary policies by Presidents Kennedy and Reagan, see Grandin (2007, pp. 87-120).

⁵ On petro-dollars and U.S. dollar hegemony, see Fouskas and Gokay (2005, esp. pp. 24-7).

⁶ For a concise overview of the destabilization campaign, see Robinson (1996, pp. 159-63). For the most detailed documentation of the CIA campaign against Allende and

the Pinochet coup, see Kornbluh (2004).

⁷ For an extensive discussion of the background of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua in the pre and post Sandinista eras, see Robinson (1996, pp. 201-55).

⁸ On the sponsorship by the Reagan Administration of low-intensity conflict and democracy promotion in Nicaragua, see Robinson (1996, pp. 215-39). Robinson estimates that the result on such low-intensity warfare for Nicaragua was “50,000 casualties and \$12 billion in damages in a society of barely 3.5 million people with an annual GNP of some 2 billion (220).” On the opposition role of various U.S. supporters of the Sandinista revolution, see Smith (1996).

⁹ On the El Salvador and Guatemalan massacres, see Grandin (2007, p. 90 and *passim*). Also, see Chomsky (1985).

¹⁰ Perkins (2006, pp. 203-10); and Johnson (2004, p. 69).

¹¹ For an incisive look at the background to the Gulf War and, especially, the role of the U.S. corporate media, see Kellner (1992, pp. 12-108).

¹² Pilger (2002, pp. 46-8); and Johnson (2004, pp. 100-02).

¹³ For an overview of the varying opinions about the impact of the sanctions policy, see Rieff (2003).

¹⁴ On Clinton’s Iraq policy and Albright’s rationalization of the tragic consequences of the sanctions, see Bacevich (2008, pp. 55-8).

¹⁵ On the CIA’s secret war in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban, see Coll (2004); and Rashid (2001).

¹⁶ For Unocal and U.S. policy in Afghanistan during the 1990’s see, Rashid (2008, pp. 157-82).

¹⁷ Rashid, (2008, pp. 61-106, 125-44, and 349-73).

¹⁸ Bacevich identifies this vision of “reinventing armed conflict” through technology as one of the central illusions about recent U.S. imperial warfare. For a further analysis of what is called the “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) and its contradictions, see Hardt and Negri (2005, pp. 41-8).

¹⁹ The authors do an excellent job of exploring the changes and contradictions of the strategic alliance between the U.S. and Israel and its future implications. See Retort (2006, pp.108-31).

²⁰ On the various forms of opposition and resistance to U.S. imperial rule, see Bruce M. Knauft, (2007, esp. pp. 787-92).

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Francis Shor is a Professor in History at Wayne State University, Detroit. He has published in the broad field of 20th Century US social and cultural history. Among his recent publications are chapters in "Trans/Forming Utopia" (2009, Peter Lang) and "Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives" (2009, ABC-CLIO). His latest publication is the book "Dying Empire: US Imperialism and Global Resistance," (2010, Routledge). Professor Shor has also been active in a variety of human rights, anti-war, and global justice organizations.