

THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR

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By Washington's logic, firecrackers should now be going off everywhere, as the counter-terror crusaders zero in on Osama bin Laden's hideout in Tora Bora. However, Europe is cool, there is apprehension throughout the South, and outright despondency blankets much of the Arab and Muslim world.

The reasons are obvious: at least 4,000 dead, a large number of them civilians, four million refugees, a return to tribal chaos with the dismemberment of central authority. What bin Laden and his organization did was horrific and inexcusable -- but to do this to a country in the name of justice? Once again, the Americans have destroyed the town in order to save it.

Washington, however, will not allow these details to spoil its triumphalist mood. The Taliban and Al Qaeda have been obliterated, but this victory has a wider significance for the Pentagon. Massive, precision-guided air power can win wars, with almost no commitment of US ground troops, and thus with almost no casualties. Ground forces cannot, of course, be totally dispensed with, but they are needed not so much for assault but for mopping up operations against demoralized and shell-shocked survivors of the rain of flame and steel-a role that can be filled by local mercenaries like the Northern Alliance.

Air Power Buries the Vietnam Syndrome

What was first tried out in the Kosovo conflict in 1999 has now been affirmed in Afghanistan. This war was the last nail in the coffin of the "Vietnam Syndrome." With this renewed confidence in what military historian Russell Weigley called "the *American Way of War*" -- massive firepower, high technology, total victory -- Washington is now seriously considering the same sort of intervention in other states that allegedly provide aid and comfort to the terrorists, with Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and Iraq being the prime candidates.

And it would be surprising if the events in Afghanistan have not given a boost to plans for a strong US military role in the war against drugs in Colombia. *Newsweek* reports that Colombian authorities seeking a more decisive US role are now "trying to show the parallels between the Taliban and their own guerrilla movements..." There is, of course, the not insignificant difference that Afghanistan is desert and Colombia is jungle, but then, is this not a minor problem that American technology can resolve without too much difficulty?

The New Trusteeship

Along with the return of confidence in the American Way of War, there is emerging a renewed respectability in direct intervention in the affairs of developing countries. Even before September 11, many developing societies, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, were already being characterized as "failed societies." Robert Kaplan's 1994 essay in *The Atlantic* was but one of several influential writings to forcefully expound the view that decolonization had led, not to the emergence of stable polities in Africa and the Middle East but to a descent into "anarchy" that threatened to destabilize the whole world. Post-September 11, respect for national sovereignty and self-determination has been further eroded in Washington and London, with conservative intellectuals giving voice to opinions that powerful states cannot articulate...yet. One influential formulation comes from Paul Johnson, author of *Modern Times*: "the best medium-term solution will be to revive the old League of Nations Mandate System, which served well as a 'respectable' form of colonialism between the wars. Syria and Iraq were once highly successful mandates. Sudan, Libya, and Iran have likewise been placed under special regimes by international treaty. Countries that cannot live at peace with their neighbors and that wage covert war against the international community cannot expect total independence. With all the permanent members of the Security Council now backing, in varying degrees, the American-led initiative, it should not be difficult to devise a new form of United Nations mandate that places terrorist states under supervision."

Not surprisingly, few of these visions address the fundamental reasons for extreme responses like terrorism: colonial borders that ensured post-colonial conflict, continuing marginalization of the new countries in an inequitable global economic order, continuing Northern control of areas containing massive oil and gas riches to fuel the oil and energy intensive civilization of the West. The next phase in Afghanistan is turning into the latest experiment for the New Trusteeship or New Mandate System, following the failure of the first major initiative owing to Somalian recalcitrance in 1993. The European Union is asked to provide -- under British leadership, of course -- a permanent occupation force, while the United Nations is brought in to broker a "representative government" among competing tribal groups to fill the political vacuum. Observing recent developments in Afghanistan, one cannot help but notice that Washington appears to be operating under the following principle: be unilateral in military action, but multilateral in political engineering -- thus getting others to take the blame if the political structure collapses.

War Without Borders

The war against terror knows no borders, so the war at home must be pursued with equal vigor. September 11 was Pearl Harbor II and the Bush administration tells Americans that they are now in the midst of total war like World War II. Not even the Cold War was

presented in such totalistic terms as the War against Terror. Laws and executive orders restricting the rights to privacy and free movement have been passed with a speed and in a manner that would have turned Joe McCarthy green with envy. The United States is only nine weeks into this war, observes David Corn in *The Nation*, but already legislation has been passed and executive orders signed that establish secret military tribunals to try non-US citizens; impose guilt by association on immigrants; authorize the Attorney General to indefinitely lock up aliens on mere suspicion; expand the use of wiretaps and secret searches; allow the use of secret evidence in immigration proceedings that aliens cannot confront or rebut; destroy the secrecy of the client-lawyer relationship by allowing the government to listen in; and institutionalize racial and ethnic profiling.

The US's European allies have rushed to do the same thing -- with many of them taking advantage, like Washington, of the anti-terrorist climate to try to push through a whole raft of legislation that had been waiting in the wings before September 11. Unlike in the US, however, citizens and parliaments are not going as gently into that good night -- including, surprisingly, the British Parliament, which shot down Tony Blair's draconian proposal to allow prosecutors to apprehend and indefinitely jail any foreigner suspected of terrorism.

Post-September US legislation is worrisome not only for its domestic implications but for its international consequences. What we see is the institutionalization of a regime of legal unilateralism: the latest package of laws and executive decrees self-endow Washington with the power to do almost anything abroad to bag terrorist targets -- which US forces proceeded to display just recently, when, in an act indistinguishable from piracy, they boarded without consent a Singaporean ship in the Arabian Sea, overpowered the crew, and launched a fruitless search for terrorists.

Had a suspect been discovered in that shipboard search, the Pentagon could have shipped him to a US base in, say, Germany, tried him there in a secret military tribunal, and, had he been found guilty by a process significantly less rigorous than civilian justice, transported him to be shot or imprisoned in the United States, possibly anonymously. The cooperation of states in whose territory terrorists are apprehended would be nice, but it would not be necessary, thank you.

Deus Ex Machina

In classical drama, September 11 was the *deus ex machina* -- an external force or event that swings a destiny that hangs in the balance in favor of one of the protagonists. The Al Qaeda New York mission was the best possible gift to the US and the global establishment in the pre-September 11 historical conjuncture. Just a few weeks before, some 300,000 people had marched in Genoa in the biggest show of force yet of an anti-corporate globalization movement that had gone from strength to strength with demonstrations in Seattle, Washington, DC, Chiang Mai, Prague, Nice, Porto Alegre, Honolulu, and Gothenburg. The Genoa protests underlined the fact that the legitimacy of the key institutions of global economic governance -- the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) -- was at an all time low, as was the whole doctrine of liberalization, deregulation, and privatization that came under the rubric of neoliberal economics or the "Washington Consensus." This erosion of credibility had been brought about by a concatenation of disasters including the Asian financial crisis, the slow-motion

disaster of structural adjustment in Africa and Latin America, and the spread of the financial crisis, first to Russia and Brazil and now to Argentina.

What made the crisis of legitimacy of the key institutions of capitalist globalization so volatile is that it intersected with a profound structural crisis of the global economy. The main features of this structural crisis were overproduction in industry, increasing monopolization to counter the loss of profitability, and unregulated speculative activity in the financial markets. When \$4.6 trillion in industrial wealth -- the equivalent of one half of the US GDP -- was wiped out in late 2000 and early 2001, the so-called "New Economy" vanished and collapsed into recession. The global reach of the recession and its depth have given rise to the term "synchronized downturn," which describes a process caused precisely by the greater interlocking and integration of economies brought about by the global liberalization of trade, investment, and finance.

With globalization's promise of prosperity, an end to poverty, and reduced inequality evaporating, it was not surprising that, as pro-globalization economist C. Fred Bergsten told the Trilateral Commission, the anti-globalization forces were "in the ascendancy."

Before September 11, moreover, an erosion of legitimacy haunted not only the institutions of global economic governance but also the institutions of political governance in the North, particularly the United States. Increasing numbers of Americans had begun to realize that their liberal democracy had been so thoroughly corrupted by corporate money politics that it deserved being designated a plutocracy. In the US presidential campaign of 2000, Senator John McCain ran a popular campaign that was centered on one issue: reforming a system of corporate control of the electoral system that, in scale, was unparalleled in the world.

The fact that the candidate most favored by Big Business lost the popular vote -- and according to some studies, the electoral vote as well -- and still ended up president of the world's most powerful liberal democracy did not help in shoring up the legitimacy of a political system that had been described by many observers as already in a state of being in a state of "cultural civil war" between conservatives and liberals, a polarization that had roughly half the country on each side of the divide.

Reversal Of Fortune

While understanding the deep sense of injustice that makes terrorists out of ordinary people, progressives have always condemned terrorism, not only because it takes innocent lives but also because it provides an opening for the counterrevolution. Indeed, post-September 11 events unfolded according to the historical script.

The smoke from the ruins of the World Trade Center was still acrid and thick when United States Trade Representative Robert Zoellick seized the opportunity it provided to regain the momentum for corporate-driven globalization. Arguing that accelerated liberalization was necessary to counter September 11's blow against the world economy, Zoellick, European Union Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy, and World Trade Organization Director General Mike Moore led the charge to stampede the developing countries into approving the launching of a new phase of trade liberalization during the Fourth Ministerial of the WTO in Doha, Qatar, last November. The Doha Declaration set the bicycle of trade liberalization that

is the WTO back upright and in motion after its collapse in Seattle.

Horst Kohler, managing director of the IMF, and Jim Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, also saw the war as an opportunity to reverse the crisis of their institutions. Kohler has cheerfully cooperated in turning the Fund into a key component of Washington's overall program for strategic states such as Pakistan and Indonesia, even as it left a non-strategic country like Argentina, which faces imminent bankruptcy, twisting in the wind. His presidency and his institution threatened by a pincer movement of criticism from the left and the right, Jim Wolfensohn, for his part, has seized on September 11 to project his institution as the key partner of the Pentagon in the war against terrorism, filling the "soft" role of addressing the poverty that breeds terrorism while the Pentagon plays the "hard" role of blasting the terrorists.

As for the crisis of political governance in the US, September 11 has turned George W. Bush from a minority president whose party lost control of the Senate into arguably the most powerful US president in recent times -- and one with an overall job approval rating of 86 per cent, according to a recent *New York Times* poll. Nearly eight-in-ten Americans support his policy of indefinite detention for non-citizens suspected of being a threat to national security, and seven-in-ten support government's listening in on conversations between clients and their lawyers.

Liberals have been thoroughly cowed, with Harvard liberal luminary Laurence Tribe condoning the use of military tribunals and the indefinite detention of over 1,200 people, while his equally famous colleague Alan Dershowitz, *The Nation* reports, "has suggested that the use of torture may be justified, as long as it is authorized by a warrant." Even Richard Falk of Princeton University, an icon of left liberalism, was initially compelled to justify Bush's war as a "just war," though he has since retracted -- thank god!

From Locke To Hobbes

The damage to the American political psyche and political system may be far-reaching. Americans have often prided themselves with having a political system whose role is to maximize and protect individual liberty along the lines propounded by John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. That Lockean-Jeffersonian tradition has been rudely overturned in the last few weeks, as Americans have been stampeded to giving government vast new powers over the individual in the name of guaranteeing order and security. Instead of moving to the future, America's limited democracy has regressed in its inspiration from the seventeenth century Locke to the sixteenth century Hobbes, whose master work *Leviathan* held that citizens owe unconditional loyalty to a state that guarantees the security of their life and limb.

The extent to which assaults on traditional liberties can now take place with impunity was shown recently when Attorney General John Ashcroft said that critics of the Bush administration's security measures were fear-mongers "who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty [and] aid terrorists." The fact that the liberal Democratic Senators he was directing these remarks at a Senate hearing dared not respond shows how skillfully the conservatives have used the anti-terrorist struggle to win the real war at home, which is the war against liberals and progressives.

Fighting For The Future

The anti-corporate globalization movement that had been surging before September 11 is now fighting desperately to regain momentum. Three developments are particularly threatening: First, the police, after being pilloried for provocateur-type tactics in Genoa, has regained its confidence in the new context marked by greater public acceptance of limitations on basic political rights. The police's new aggressiveness was in full display during the recent IMF-World Bank meeting in Ottawa on November 18-19, when with no provocation and in full view of the press, Canadian police in full riot gear swooped down on a peaceful anti-corporate globalization protest to apprehend young marchers who were doing nothing but marching peacefully.

Second, the definition of "terrorist" that is being used in both European and American legislation is so vague that it can be applied to non-violent groups that espouse civil disobedience, which is an essential weapon of the movement, or to groups that do some damage to property but in a symbolic fashion that harms nobody.

Third, the big anti-globalization events involve the massing of hundreds of thousands of people across borders, and this can now be easily thwarted invoking the new legislation legalizing the arbitrary questioning, detention, expulsion, or refusal of entry to foreigners on the mere grounds of suspicion of their being terrorists, terrorist supporters, or terrorist fellow travelers-in short, anybody that can be conveniently tainted with the terrorist brush.

All this adds up to a chilling effect on mass protests, with the authorities and dominant media all too happy to have the digital images of terrorists attacks blend in the public mind with the militant but peaceful civil disobedience of anti-globalization activists.

Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker?

Washington is savoring its triumph. But while the image it wants to promote is that of America being Luke Skywalker liberating Afghan people from a repressive Taliban Empire, in large parts of the Third World it comes across, as John Lloyd of the *Financial Times* points out, more as Luke's antagonist, the evil Darth Vader. Indeed, the American way of war reinforces this, with death raining down from an unseen, distant hand. This was war that was impersonal and terrifying to the nth degree, and there is a great deal of truth in *Newsweek* writer John Barry's comment that, with their unnervingly accurate bombing campaign, "to many Taliban, the Americans must have seemed like creatures from another planet: out there somewhere, in the sky or across the horizon, powerful beyond comprehension."

George Lucas could not have managed a better script for the Empire striking back than the Afghanistan campaign.

There is one thing sure, however: empires always spawn resistance. It is, in fact, arguable that while the US may have won another battle, its strategic situation in the Middle East and South Asia has been eroded by this very conflict. A fundamentalist regime is now a possibility in Pakistan. The Washington-backed Saudi feudal elite is now more than ever

isolated from the masses, with a critical mass of Saudi youths apparently regarding bin Laden as a hero-confronting the US with the prospect of Washington ultimately serving as a police force to save the elite from its people. With the bombing of Afghanistan and the Bush administration's strong tilt towards Israel, a deep anger against the US and the West is digging in from Muslim North Africa to Muslim Indonesia, providing fertile ground for the expansion of movements that will seek to wrest power from US-allied regimes.

Will it be advanced technology or popular mobilization that will be the decisive factor in this epochal struggle for freedom, justice, and sovereignty of the peoples of the South against the empire? Will the outcome be Afghanistan or Vietnam? Will the survivor be Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker? The jury is still out on these questions and will be for some time.

As for the anti-corporate globalization movement, Sept. 11 may yet turn out to be a temporary reversal from which it can draw more strength. The massive street mobilizations paralleling big assemblies of the global elite, like the meetings of the IMF and the G-8, have now reached the limits of their effectiveness, and this may well push the movement to come up with innovative approaches combining mass, legal, and parliamentary strategies. Indeed, if there is a clear silver lining in the post-September 11 situation, it is that three movements that had formerly gone their independent ways -- the peace movement, the human rights movement, and the anti-corporate globalization movement -- now find it critical to collaborate more closely with one another. This is a potent alliance that can make a significant contribution to changing the correlation of forces in medium and long term, as the exclusionary, marginalizing, and repressive thrusts of the global system inexorably assert themselves. The guardians and propagandists of the empire are proclaiming victory too soon. To borrow the World War II imagery that George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, and John Ashcroft are so fond of invoking these days, we are not in 1945, folks, but 1941.