

A brilliant and provocative theory of what's driving the new imperialism—
and no, it's not just the oil, stupid!

BARBARA EHRENREICH

THE WAR AT HOME

DOMESTIC COSTS OF BUSH'S MILITARISM

FRANCES FOX PIVEN

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THE WAR AT HOME

THIS BOOK EXAMINES the domestic political dynamics that accompanied America's unilateral turn toward preemptive war.

A great deal has been said about the American goals for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, much of it summed up by the term "imperialism." Much also has been said about the international consequences of these wars. I agree that the United States is an imperial power, and that the international consequences of our new aggressions—the loss of American standing in the world, our eroded alliances, the spread of terrorism—are all-important. However, a singular fixation on the international dimensions of U.S. policy is turning our eyes away from the under-examined domestic politics of the "new" imperialism. It is also turning us away from the potential for domestic resistance to this new phase of imperialism, resistance that may be capable of curbing our military aggression.

In the pages that follow, I present three arguments. First, war overseas always has a home front—and domestic fallout. The current wars were promoted—and fed—by the powerful U.S. military establishment and the inner networks of neo-conservative intellectuals and think tanks linked to the military establishment. These wars also, at least temporarily, helped resolve political tensions between the right wing think tanks, faith-based interest groups, and other factions on the right that surround and penetrate the current federal regime. Moreover, and enormously important, from the initial announcement of a war on terror in the

wake of 9/11 to the continuing occupation of Iraq, U.S. military aggression has served to shore up voter support for the Bush administration. The rush of patriotism and jingoism that inevitably follow in the wake of war was surely anticipated, along with the electoral advantage this gave to the Republican Party and to a president who took office under the cloud of a disputed election and whose popular support was falling in the polls.

Second, the emotional fervor generated by these wars smoothed the way for huge advances in the domestic neo-conservative agenda. The business interests backing that agenda, with its emphasis on social spending cuts, regulation rollbacks, and regressive restructuring of the tax system, have been influential in American politics for several decades, and especially since the 1980 election. But they have always been resisted, so that progress has been slower than conservatives would prefer. There are huge and predatory profits at stake here. Consider only the long-term right-wing campaign to privatize Social Security and Medicare, the base programs of the American welfare state. These programs are popular—Social Security is often referred to as the “third rail” of American politics—and the effort to discredit them to pave the way for privatization has been stubbornly resisted, both by the public and by Congress. The president’s poll ratings were low and falling before their post-9/11 boost, and then declined again until the invasion of Iraq.

The war on terror and then the war on Iraq each gave Bush a lift in the polls, generating the support for the commander in chief and his party that made new inroads on these and other social programs possible.¹ When House Speaker Dennis Hastert worried, for example, that some Republicans would defect on a vote to defeat the Corporate Patriot Enforcement Act (intended to crack down on offshore corporate tax dodges), he called on them

not to embarrass the president in a time of war.² And remember Tom DeLay's belligerent assertion during the congressional debate over the second of Bush's huge tax cuts that "nothing is more important in the face of war than cutting taxes," no matter that the tax cuts devoured the Social Security surplus.³ A moment's thought reveals the statement as ludicrous, which brings me to my third point.

The conduct of America's current wars violates the lessons of history. Historically, governments waging war sooner or later tried to compensate their people for the blood and wealth they sacrificed. As war continued and the rush of patriotic fervor faded, governments tried to shore up support by expanding democratic rights, making the rich share some of the costs through increased taxation, and initiating or expanding social welfare programs.

This period is markedly different. During World War II, tax rates on the rich rose to 90 percent; during our current wars, taxes on the rich have been slashed. Toward the end of World War I, the franchise was expanded in war-weary Britain, Woodrow Wilson announced his support for collective bargaining, and toward the end of the Vietnam War, eighteen-year-olds were given the right to vote in the United States; our current wars have so far seen the stripping away of civil liberties and a sustained assault on unions. And at the end of World War II, European nations vastly expanded their health, housing, and income security programs, and the United States initiated a remarkably generous veterans' benefit program. During the current period, social welfare programs are being cut, both at the federal and the state level, and even some veterans' benefits have been reduced.

This pattern suggests a developing regime vulnerability. My concluding pages will examine the potential for domestic resistance generated by the home front in America's imperial wars.

* * *

Attacks on American troops continue in Iraq. More than 750 are dead, several thousand injured, and untold more exposed to the long-term aftereffects of munitions that use depleted uranium casings. At the end of March 2004, after an American convoy hit a bomb planted in a street in Falluja, four "security consultants" were shot, their bodies torn apart and dragged through the streets by a jeering mob,⁴ setting off a string of reactions sparking Shiite and Sunni uprisings throughout the country. Iraqis who collaborate with the occupation administration are increasingly the victims of guerilla attacks, including not only the new inductees to the Iraqi police force, but reportedly also professionals and politicians working with the American authorities. The death toll of Iraqi civilians has reached about 10,000. Well-armed Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite militias are resisting American pressure to disband. Infrastructure remains weak, and widespread looting continues.

In early March 2004, suicide bombings in Baghdad and Karbala killed at least 200 Shiite pilgrims on the Muslim holiday Ashura, evoking prospects of the revival of centuries-old Sunni violence against Shiites that could spread across the Middle East and South Asia. "It is virtually unthinkable," said Vali Nasr in the *New York Times*, "to many Sunnis that one of the most important Arab countries—the seat of the Abbasid Empire from the eighth to thirteenth centuries, which established Sunni supremacy and brutally suppressed Shiites—would pass from Sunni to Shiite domination. In militant Sunni circles, it is taken as proof of an American conspiracy against them and against Islam as a whole."⁵ Meanwhile, Afghanistan may be headed for a return to a regime of warlords and opium, of Taliban domination and chaos, and the

possibility looms of new assertions of U.S. military power in that region.

American military aggression in the post-World War II period is of course not new.⁶ What is new is the public bravado and doggedness with which the current wars were pursued in the face of worldwide opposition. But, though great rivers of words have poured forth, the reasons for this new sort of unilateral war and the in-your-face posture with which it was undertaken and is now defended, remain murky.

There are official explanations, of course, but they slip about, fastening on one rationale until discrediting evidence emerges, and then turning to another until it too falls under the weight of evidence. In fact, Bush campaigned in the 2000 election with rhetoric that disdained foreign entanglements and especially "nation building." We have since learned, however, that key groups in the new administration came to office with ambitions to curb "rogue states" and to assert American military power across the globe, especially in the oil-rich Middle East. Iraq, with its large oil reserves, and weakened by a decade of misgovernment and sanctions, was the place they wanted to begin. We can also surmise from the plans unveiled by the Pentagon once the invasion was over and the occupation had begun, that Iraq is to be one of the "forward operating sites" in a planned expansion of American military capacity worldwide.⁷

The public arguments, however, emphasized the danger Iraq's weapons of mass destruction posed to the United States. A series of authoritative analyses now make it clear that Iraq did not harbor weapons of mass destruction. Not only did flawed American intelligence reports vastly overstate the threat, these reports were then further exaggerated by the Bush administration.⁸ And rather than making the United States and the world safer, the war in Iraq

has spurred Iran's nuclear ambitions, while North Korea appears to have embarked on a program to produce hundreds of warheads in the next decade. Our designation of Pakistan as a "major non-NATO ally" stands despite revelations of its active exchange of nuclear and missile technology with North Korea.⁹ The federal government has quietly acknowledged the increased threats by reviving a program to study nuclear fallout.¹⁰

Nor has any evidence surfaced to support the administration's unlikely claim that secular Iraq was linked to the fiercely religious al-Qaeda, another justification for war. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in fact increased the terrorist threat. As Chalmers Johnson points out, while there were five major al-Qaeda attacks worldwide between 1993 and 9/11, there were seventeen such attacks in the next two years.¹¹ The evidence points to al-Qaeda in the bombing of commuter trains in Madrid in March 2004, the deadliest terror attack in Europe since World War II. The attack left hundreds dead, brought millions of Spaniards into the streets, and resulted in the defeat of the government that had collaborated with the United States.¹²

Finally, there is the familiar "regime change" explanation: once Saddam Hussein was toppled, Iraq would emerge as a model democracy in the Arab world, encouraging democratic currents elsewhere in the Middle East, or at least intimidating totalitarian rulers. The "most idealistic war in modern times," wrote David Ignatius, the *Washington Post* commentator.¹³ Instead, American aggression has fueled fundamentalism and sparked new terrorist assaults in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Indonesia.

Of course, the administration's claims are propaganda intended to justify war-making, and no thoughtful observer would expect the leaders of a state at war to do less than justify their own actions. But the explanations of academic critics for these new wars are not entirely satisfactory either. There are the straightfor-

ward geopolitical arguments that explain American aggression in Iraq as a grab for its rich oil resources,¹⁴ or the war in Afghanistan as an effort to gain military bases not only in Afghanistan but also in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, which would ensure control of a prospective multibillion dollar pipeline to carry Caspian oil to the West.¹⁵ In February 2004 a consortium of international oil companies formally agreed to proceed with a \$29 billion development of the large Kashagan oil field in Kazakhstan.¹⁶ Or, as Kevin Phillips suggests, domination of Iraq is intended by our leaders to shore up American domination in the region by replacing the increasingly unreliable Saudis, whose oil reserves may in any case be declining, with a totally reliable Iraq.¹⁷ To those who argue the United States did not need more oil, there are less direct variants of the geopolitical explanation that see preemptive war not as a means of grabbing oil in the short run but rather for the longer run when available supplies run short,¹⁸ or less directly still, as a strategy of asserting domination over Europe and China by controlling the main oil resources of the world.¹⁹

Or there are systemic arguments that locate the motor for our new foreign wars in crises arising from the dynamics of American capitalism. Immanuel Wallerstein thinks the United States needed to go to war in Iraq to demonstrate America's overwhelming military power, a demonstration that would intimidate European nations freed from their dependence on the United States by the demise of the Soviet threat, and also intimidate third world powers pursuing nuclear armaments.²⁰ Peter Gowan similarly argues the importance of displaying America's military prowess to shore up "global hegemony" and to foil emerging European efforts to achieve autonomy.²¹ David Harvey sees the new imperialism as driven by the internal contradictions of capital accumulation, and specifically the need to find outlets for surplus capital.²² And Chalmers Johnson also sees the United States as "a military jug-

gernaut intent on world domination.”²³ Elsewhere Johnson says, “establishing a more impressive footprint has now become part of the new justification for a major enlargement of our empire. . . with a preventive war strategy against ‘rogue states,’ ‘bad guys,’ and ‘evil-doers’” across an “arc of instability” running through the third world.²⁴ Others argue that military assertion was driven by the need to protect a weak U.S. economy, suffering from bloated trade and budget deficits and a plummeting dollar, from the danger of foreign disinvestment.²⁵

There is no disputing that the United States is the dominant military power in the world and that it uses its power to extract resources from elsewhere, especially from the southern hemisphere, and to force economic policies on nations that favor American capital. These are the classic motives of imperial powers. Before the current wars, the United States was already the dominant imperial power in the world. American corporations extracted other nations’ resources on favorable terms, and the American state wielded strong influence over the policies of most nations. “[T]he entire advanced-capitalist zone was integrated without much strain into an informal American imperium, whose landmarks were Bretton Woods, the Marshall and Dodge Plans, NATO and U.S.–Japan Security Pact,” writes Perry Andersen.²⁶

Military power was important in this domination. But the use of overt force was restrained, exercised mainly in the immediate sphere of American influence in the western hemisphere (Grenada, Panama), or through covert military actions (Chile), as well as through assassinations and coups. These forms of military intervention did not command the world’s attention because they were undertaken by the CIA or by client regimes. There were also military actions undertaken in cooperation with other powers, or under the aegis of NATO or the UN, which could be presented to the world as multilateral policing actions. In the 1990s, the

United States intervened in this way in Bosnia, East Timor, Haiti, Kosovo, and Somalia, and deployed a kind of gunboat diplomacy against Afghanistan, China, North Korea, Sudan, and of course Iraq.²⁷

The strategy of multilateralism in turn lent American domination a considerable degree of legitimacy, a legitimacy enhanced by the worldwide spread of American popular culture. "For America is part of everyone's imaginative life," writes Timothy Garton Ash, "through movies, music, television and the Web, whether you grow up in Bilbao, Beijing, or Bombay. Everyone has a New York in their heads, even if they have never been there—which is why the destruction of the twin towers had such an impact."²⁸ Joseph Nye calls this American "soft power," the power to persuade that greatly augments military power by making its exercise less necessary.²⁹ Multilateralism thus magnified American power (which Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay say the Bush regime simply didn't understand).³⁰

So, why the radical shift? U.S. military might was clearly overwhelming and undisputed. Why was a costly new demonstration necessary? Were there looming threats to the imperium, to "existing patterns of ownership, investment, trade, or access to resources" as in Arundhati Roy's formulation?³¹ What strategic calculus demonstrated this display of military capacity was worth its probable costs in frayed multilateral ties and in the worldwide loss of American legitimacy?

Many intellectuals, both on the left and the right, think the current wars make little sense. Indeed, they judge current U.S. policy to be totally reckless, if not lunatic. "Looking back over the forty years of the Cold War," writes Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., "we can be everlastingly grateful that the loonies on both sides were powerless. In 2003, however, they run the Pentagon, and preventive war—the Bush doctrine—is now official policy." Eric Hobsbawm

sums up the view: "The sudden emergence of an extraordinary, ruthless, antagonistic flaunting of U.S. power is hard to understand, all the more so since it fits neither with long-tested imperial policies developed during the Cold War, nor the interests of the U.S. economy. The policies that have recently prevailed in Washington seem to all outsiders so mad that it is difficult to understand what is really intended." Hobsbawm goes on to assert the "frivolity of U.S. decision making"; by weakening all the international arrangements for keeping order, formal and informal, there is the danger of "destabilizing of the world."³²

Mainstream leaders in the foreign policy establishment agree. Even the hawkish Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security advisor, told a Washington D.C. symposium in October that "American power worldwide is at its historic nadir" because of its paranoiac view of the world, because its fear of terrorism verges on panic, and is stoked by "extreme demagoguery." Serge Schmemmann of the *International Herald Tribune* says the new American order "has generated a tsunami of anti-Americanism, with the United States perceived in some quarters as a greater threat than al-Qaeda."³³ Even Margaret Tutweiler, the new State Department official in charge of public diplomacy, acknowledges "it will take us many years of hard, focused work" to restore America's standing in the world.³⁴ From the perspective of those in the more Wilsonian foreign policy establishment who believe that America's foreign policy goals should be pursued through multilateral alliances and institutions, and shrouded in claims of promoting peace, democracy, and markets, the militarism and unilateralism of the war on Iraq is ominous.³⁵ "A great philosophical schism has opened with the West," writes Robert Kagan and . . . mutual antagonism threatens to debilitate both sides of the transatlantic community."³⁶

There is even dissent from the military. The Army War College

issued a report in January 2004 calling the war in Iraq “unnecessary” and the war on terror “unrealistic.”³⁷ And Brian Urquhart sums up his catalog of the “strange and unsettling developments of the first four years of the twenty-first century with “the opening of a dangerous gulf of misunderstanding between the United States and much of the rest of the world; the growing, and terrifying, threat of nuclear proliferation; and the proclamation by the United States of the policy of preventive and preemptive war and at least one questionable experiment with it. The relative optimism that attended the beginning of the century has largely evaporated.”³⁸ Not only had the United States declared its right to undertake preemptive war, but it had pulled out of the major multilateral initiatives to deal with international problems, including the Kyoto Protocol to check global warming and the International Criminal Court; it had sabotaged an effort to give muscle to the biological weapons convention; it denigrated the Security Council; and dismissed NATO allies as “old Europe.”³⁹

So, the puzzle remains. Why the turn to preemptive war and, relatedly, the cavalier treatment of the painstakingly constructed multilateral arrangements of the past half century? I don’t think the question can be fully answered if the war in Iraq is regarded solely as a foreign policy strategy. The war is also a domestic strategy, rooted not only in calculations of America’s global power, but in calculations geared to shoring up the Bush regime’s domestic power and its ability to pursue its domestic policy agenda. To suggest a domestic dimension of foreign policy is actually not particularly novel. That the Cold War was useful because it justified the domestic Red Scare of the 1950s and the resultant taming of American labor is a common enough observation, for example. Margaret Thatcher went to war in the Falkland Islands not to restore British imperial power but for the boost it gave her among an enthusiastic British electorate.

A number of analysts have pointed more generally to the domestic functions of external aggression, as when David Harvey, after citing Hannah Arendt's observation that state authority requires "external props," refers, however briefly, to the "relation between the internal and external conditions of political power." In his reading, 9/11 provided the political opening to name an evil external enemy that allowed the regime to "proclaim national solidarity, [and] also to impose order and stability on civil society at home."⁴⁰ But Harvey's main analytic interest is in the ways that foreign war serves contemporary American capitalism, not only by providing a "spatial fix" for a crisis-prone system of capital accumulation, but ultimately by making possible "accumulation by dispossession." In other words, military aggression is a strategy of plunder. I don't disagree. But I think in this case, military aggression also paved the political way for policies that are plundering Americans. The predatory beast was turning on its own. I turn first to the ways that war shored up the regime's power at home.