

Globalization and War: Analyzing the Impact of the Airliner Attacks.

By David Small, September 2001.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whenever the police begin a murder inquiry, they almost invariably begin by asking one question: did the victim have any enemies? They examine the victim's life and try to work out if there is anyone who might have wished them harm. In most circumstances, the motivation for a terrorist attack is obvious. But a terrorist attack on the US could come from almost anywhere. There is such a diversity of people who have endured the terror of attacks from the US or US-sponsored military. To name Chileans, Palestinians, Timorese and Iraqis would be to overlook Vietnamese, Granadans, Filipinos, Nicaraguans and so many others.

One can understand at an emotional level why so many, but by no means all, Americans might feel like military retaliation in response to the attacks on New York and Washington. The depth and extent of emotions of vengeance in the US is clearly evident in their persistent and enthusiastic application of the death penalty in the face of no evidence that it acts as a deterrent to heinous crimes and criminals. Military retaliation in the name of a "war on terrorism" will also fail as a deterrent. Worse, it will nourish terrorism and generate more terrorists.

If there is one thing we can be sure of about the motives of the perpetrators of the attacks on New York and Washington, it is that they viewed their acts as retaliation. Retaliation is the fuel of warfare. And in the new kind of warfare that is emerging in the wake of the attacks on the US, it is a more powerful and volatile fuel than it has ever been in the past. In this paper I will examine how the war we are currently heading towards differs from but is also an extension of previous notions of war. I will argue that the "war on terrorism" represents an attempt by those who dominate global political and economic structures to refine a system of social control that enhances their power and domination and poses a serious threat to freedom and democracy throughout the world.

2. GLOBAL BALANCE OF POWER DURING THE COLD WAR

One of the most obvious effects of the airliner attacks has been to highlight the folly of George Bush's efforts to restart the US's "Star Wars" missile defence system. Conceived in Cold War conditions, Star Wars lost its strategic value when the short to medium term risk of the US being the subject of an attack from intercontinental ballistic missiles fell to near zero with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Up until that point, the US had been engaged in an arms race with its Soviet superpower rival in which it aimed to develop first strike capacity; that is, the ability to start and win a global nuclear war.

The war at that time was between capitalism and communism. It consisted of not only the Cold War against what President Reagan called "the evil empire" of the Soviet Union but also a series of hot wars being waged in dozens of countries throughout the Third World. Typically, these hot wars took the form of a military dictatorship, with the financial and (direct or indirect) military backing of the US. These regimes engaged in counter-insurgency action against guerrilla forces and associated political groups of peasants, workers and others. The insurgent groups called themselves national liberation movements, were usually socialist in orientation and often received some support from the Soviet Union, China or Cuba.

The US and its Western allies won the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened up a whole range of possibilities for the victorious capitalist side and ushered in a new era of globalisation. The economic core of globalisation is the restructuring of social relations both within and between countries along neoliberal lines. Within countries this has meant the withdrawal of the state from a range of sectors in which it had previously been a major and often the dominant force, such as health, education and other areas of infrastructure and essential utilities. Often, these kinds of restructuring programmes have taken place against a background of public protest. In many cases, they were imposed by the creditors of impoverished and indebted nations as a package of structural adjustment policies.

3. GLOBALISATION AND NEOLIBERALISM

With victory in the Cold War, the economic model of neoliberalism that had become entrenched in the US, the UK and other countries during the 1980s could now become institutionalised and be used to shape the global economy. Some of these gains were cemented in place through the Uruguay round of the Gatt which culminated in the creation of the

World Trade Organisation (WTO). The move towards global economic liberalisation is also being bolstered by regional initiatives such as NAFTA and APEC and by other bodies of influence such as the OECD and the G8.

Globalisation's neoliberal model aims to facilitate the movement of capital and investment within and between countries. It enhances the power of the individual and especially the corporation in relation to the state. In the new era of globalisation, the nation state, which used to be a principal agent of development is finding itself increasingly relegated to the role of preparing the ground and providing the environment for corporations to vigorously pursue their own interests and maximise their profits.

One of the most obvious impacts of these policies has been to speed up the rate at which resources have been moving out of the hands of the poorest people in the poorest countries and into the hands of the richest people in the richest countries. Today, the joint wealth of the world's three richest individuals is more than the combined GDP of the world's 48 poorest countries. This is why growing numbers of people throughout the world are organising popular resistance to these trends with the anti-globalisation movement gaining strength and growing into a very formidable force. Among its victories, it forced the OECD into backing away from its plans to construct the far-reaching Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and it prevented the WTO from holding its meeting in Seattle.

The anti-globalisation movement is the new face of opposition to imperialism as the end of the Cold War led to the end of most of the hot wars being waged by national liberation movements. The demise of the Soviet Union left Third World liberation movements with nowhere to go: not only nowhere for support in the liberation struggle, but nowhere for trade and aid once the victory had been secured. If the Sandanista victory in Nicaragua was short-lived, any people's movement wishing to follow the same path to power during the era of globalisation would be destroyed even more swiftly. One by one liberation movements realised that, even if they could secure it, a victory would be brief and hollow and not worth the suffering and death it would entail. One by one, often with greta reluctance and at the cost of considerable internal strife, they recognised the imperatives of the era of globalisation and exchanged idealism for pragmatism. Even the long-suffering Palestinians ended up agreeing to propositions that fell well short of what they had roundly rejected many years earlier – only to find that this was now more than Israel and the US would allow them..

At the global level, the end of the Cold War left the US and its Western allies in a position of unassailable military dominance. The only potential threat could come from a rogue state, probably from the Third World. A US National Security Policy Review prepared early in the first Bush presidency spelled out the type of response that this should elicit: "In cases where the US confronts much weaker enemies ... our challenge will be not simply to defeat them, but to defeat them decisively and rapidly". As if to demonstrate what such a threat could look like and how it could be dealt with, the Gulf War was the military consummation of the new era of globalisation. Saddam Hussein couldn't have played the role better if it had been scripted for him.

Apparently misinterpreting the nods and winks from the US, he seized Kuwait from a pro-Western oligarchy and refused to give it back. He had at his disposal a military capacity in excess of what most other Third World regimes could muster, having been the beneficiary of Western military largesse for many years. And, short of being killed, his personal hold on power would be enhanced by a war of almost any kind with almost any outcome.

The US-led coalition fired at Iraq an estimated 85,000 tonnes of bombs with a destructive power equivalent to five Hiroshimas. Using the latest military technology to deliver this destruction with unprecedented accuracy, it crippled the Iraqi infrastructure. The coalition waged a one-sided war largely by remote control from bases that were out of range of Iraqi forces, costing a lot of money but very little loss of life - of coalition nationals. It lasted about a hundred hours and was broadcast around the world by US military censors; the first war to take the form of a live TV show, a cross between reality TV and an arms infomercial. The show was about the forces for freedom in an unavoidable conflict against an evil so great that, if unchecked, it threatened the whole of the civilised world.

4. THE NEW WORLD ORDER

The Gulf War ushered in what US President Bush referred to as "the new world order". To Saddam Hussein and anyone else who might defy the US, it delivered the message, again in the words of Bush, "that what we say goes".

In 1991, in the wake of the Gulf War, I predicted that there was an enhanced risk of countries turning to nuclear weapons. Short of total

submission to US dictates, which seemed highly unlikely, it seemed the most likely option.

"For any middle-rating power which seeks to contest imperialist domination, there is now a greater incentive to try to develop nuclear weapons. As Iraq's massive defeat showed, when a country is under attack from new-generation satellite-coordinated weapons without systems operated by an even higher technology, there can be no effective defence. For most middle-rating powers, it would now appear technologically easier to develop a crude nuclear deterrent than to expect to be able to compete in a high-tech conventional war."

Since then, India and Pakistan have both officially joined the ranks of the nuclear armed. And I believe that this impetus for nuclear proliferation still exists. However, the attacks on New York and Washington have shown two other developments. First, they have shown that it is possible to inflict a staggering degree of destruction with a weapon far cruder and far easier to obtain than even the crudest nuclear device – in this case, an airliner. And secondly, they demonstrate that the new era of globalisation that permits corporations and businesspeople to operate in a deregulated netherworld, bypassing the checks and balances of elected national governments, also permits people and groups with other motivations to operate in the same way. Both of these features make it important for us to understand the implications of the US's declaration of war on terrorism.

The US was very quick to claim that there must have been a nation state behind the attacks it suffered. In the same breath, it also vowed to draw no distinction between those who carried out the attack and those who harboured them. These declarations are worth noting for two reasons. First, in seeking to justify killing people who are in the way of a broader military objective as the US also did in Vietnam and other places and continues to do in its sanctions against Iraq, the US rationale is ethically indistinguishable from that which says the people working in the World Trade Centre on 11 September can be punished and killed for the actions of the government that represents them. The moral (or, rather, immoral) reasoning is identical. Second, groups such as national liberation movements that engaged in acts of violence for political causes tried in vain for decades to be recognised by their enemy as armies of soldiers and not bands of criminals. This was particularly true when their operatives were caught and denied the status and rights of political prisoners or prisoners of war. Now, suddenly, we are told that this act of terrorism is not simply a horrendous crime but is an act of war.

The US authorities are clearly choosing their words to allow themselves the scope for an extraordinary response. One aspect of this is likely to be a Gulf War type of attack on a country or group of countries. The other is what is being referred to as the “war on terrorism”.

With the finger of suspicion pointing firmly at Osama bin Laden, the most likely target for the first type of operation is Afghanistan and the US's former ally, the Taleban. On past experience, we should be skeptical about accusations made against Osama bin Laden, the Taleban or anyone else. Recently declassified government documents reveal that when Cuba was public enemy number one shortly after the revolution, the leaders of the US military devised a detailed plan to kill civilians through terrorist attacks in the US, blame Fidel Castro and use the scandal to justify a full-scale military invasion of the island. US spokespeople are already talking about the need to avoid compromising their intelligence gathering methods and sources in publicising the evidence they are using to decide who is to blame for the airliner attacks. Clearly, the US will find some individuals or groups to blame because the government rhetoric together with the public demand for revenge that it fuels and is fuelled by was so quick to declare it an act of war. The US will not allow this to be an unsolved crime, even if that is what it is.

Perhaps the New York and Washington attacks were planned by Osama bin Laden and perhaps he did it with the active support of the Taleban and perhaps this can all be documented with compelling evidence that can be made public and independently verified. But perhaps not. The point is that if a lone gunman can assassinate President Kennedy, and a cult leader can persuade dozens of people to join him in mass suicide, and any number of individuals can carry out suicide attacks for political reasons, it is quite conceivable that attacks like those in New York and Washington could have been and could be in the future be carried out by an autonomous cell with nobody else responsible. And such a group could come from almost anywhere.

5. A NEW KIND OF WAR

It is with this spectre in mind that the US has announced its war on terrorism. So in addition to whatever bombardment it organises to quench its thirst for revenge, there is a whole new kind of combat being organised. This combat is being presented as a fight to defend freedom and democracy, but it is actually a serious threat to freedom and democracy. It is quite unlike any other kind of war that has been waged. However, US authorities are presenting it in the form of a war in order to

ride the emotional wave of fear and vengeance, and to secure public support for sweeping new powers.

In wartime, people and societies almost always willingly compromise some – often, quite a lot - of their civil rights in order to strengthen the power of the state to act against the enemy. Media censorship, checkpoints, ID cards are commonplace and the public, as long as they accept the necessity of war, tend to be relaxed about the trade-offs involved. But until now, wars have always had certain features. There are two or more sides who declare themselves as enemies. Each side has demands it makes of the other; some ultimatum that must be met if hostilities are to cease. So every war has, or at least has the potential to have, an end. In other words, leaving aside objections to war as such, and accepting that war is part of a continuum that begins when diplomatic measures are exhausted, wars are by definition temporary. They may be long but, whatever the outcome is, an endpoint is conceivable. It is this inherently temporary nature of war that leads people to agree to surrender their rights to the state for the duration.

The real danger of signing up to the “war on terrorism” is that it is war without end. Put another way, it is the kind of war, the waging of which would make it impossible to end.

Acts of terror, especially where the strategy is suicidal, such as the airliner attacks on the US, are acts of desperation. They can occur any time, but are much more likely in circumstances where there is perceived to be a great injustice and no other alternative course of action is available. The new world order announced in the wake of the Gulf War and relentlessly imposed at an economic level through the global application of an economic system that disenfranchises and promotes the impoverishment of most of the world’s people has created an unsustainable pressure cooker. The greater the exploitation and the more total the control, the more likely it is to provoke explosive and violent responses.

The answer is not to turn up the heat and screw the lid down more tightly. The only sustainable solution is to ease the pressure and re-examine the whole situation. We need to allow this terrible tragedy to move us to re-examine the way the world is run. As with our reactions to the alarming rise in high-school shooting massacres in the US and youth suicides in many countries, our response to the airliner attacks must be careful and considered and aimed at the underlying cause of this kind of event.

The threat we are facing will not be solved by a military campaign against Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan or anywhere else. It will not be solved by giving more power and resources to secret state agencies of surveillance and control. The US spends \$70 billion per year on such agencies and was still unable to see what may well have been their prime suspect planning this major operation.

6. CONCLUSION: DON'T JOIN THE WAR

The US presents an attack on itself not as one gang attacking another, but as a gang attacking the police station. However, a police force derives its legitimacy, not from one gang calling itself the Police but by people in a community or society coming together and agreeing to hand over some of their individual rights to an institution that will preserve the common good, as expressed by a set of agreed and written laws. No such body exists at the global level and, to the extent that anything might even come close, it would be the United Nations and not the United States.

Let us resist the manipulative US line that says everyone is either for them or against them. We should not take sides, but rather refuse to be a party to the war on terrorism as it is currently being designed and marketed. The terrorism that we are supposed to be fighting cannot be found and rooted out because it is in the bloodstream of humanity and it has been put there by systems of exploitation and injustice.

The “war on terrorism” poses a major threat to civil liberties in all those societies that sign up to it. It also threatens the whole fabric of what it means to be a democracy. Recently we have seen moves in many countries to bolster the power of unaccountable and secretive state agencies to spy on groups and individuals who contest the prevailing orthodoxy. In the name of a war on terrorism, we are likely to see a more pronounced contraction in the room that is available for legitimate debate and dissent, room that is vital for democracy. If we allow this to happen, we will have pushed further away the chances of developing new, more participatory, more human ways of organising our societies.

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