

# ***CHALLENGING EMPIRE: How People, Governments and the UN Defy U.S. Power***

By Phyllis Bennis

## **INTRODUCTION**

As the South Pacific's summer sun rose early in the morning of February 15, 2003, tens of thousands of people began gathering in New Zealand and Australia to protest the looming U.S. war against Iraq. A few hours later, following the sun, hundreds of thousands more took to the streets of Manila, Jakarta, New Delhi, across the south Asian peninsula and then up into snowy central Asia, throughout Africa south to Durban and Johannesburg, gathering in tiny towns and moving north and west across the Middle East to through the chilly capitals of Europe. The protests jumped across the Atlantic to dozens of Latin American towns and more than 400 cities throughout the wintry United States.

In New York, peace campaigners outside the headquarters of the United Nations on New York City's East River passed the half-million mark, despite police efforts to divert tens of thousands more trying to reach the rally site. There, on a huge stage overlooking the enormous, shivering crowd braving a bitter wind on the coldest day of the year, a parade of activists, politicians, cultural workers and artists repeated the call that had rocketed around the world on that singular day – "The World Says No to War."

Half-way through the Saturday afternoon rally, a cell phone rang backstage. The caller relayed news of an AP story that had just broken, dateline United Nations. Someone copied out the two lines, scrawling on the back of a leaflet, and raced back to show it to the rally organizers and stage managers, who sent one of the earlier speakers back out on stage to read it to the huge crowd. "Rattled by an outpouring of international anti-war sentiment," the wire story read, "the United States and Britain began reworking a draft resolution today to authorize force against Saddam Hussein. Diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the final product may be a softer text that does not explicitly call for war." Half a million people roared their pride. The world had said no to war, and those in power were forced to answer.

Two days later, even the *New York Times* acknowledged the change in the international balance of forces. There are once again "two super-powers in the world," the *Times* reported on their front page. "The United States, and global public opinion."<sup>1</sup> The second super-power was born.

It was a staggering moment. The *Times*' definition captured not only the dynamism of the day's events, but the understanding that the core of the new challenge to Washington's war-drive was centered in the streets, in the massive demonstrations that

brought millions out in countries around the world to protest the coming U.S. unilateral war in Iraq. While the journalists may not have fully grasped exactly what was underway, it was clear that even the *Times* itself recognized that something, somehow, was different.

Street demonstrations had happened before and would happen again. International activists in many countries had planned simultaneous protests before. The hard work of building a movement would continue whether or not the specific demands of a particular demonstration were won or not. What was different this time was the power that emerged from linking the three major components of what together would soon become the second-superpower: the global people's movement reinforced by its unified call to stop Washington's war; the assortment of governments around the world who recognized that the U.S. drive towards empire was not in their interests and responded (whatever their other motivations) to their populations' anti-war mobilizations by rejecting Washington's demands; and the United Nations itself, which for that historical moment stood defiant of U.S. pressure and thus played the role its Charter mandates, working to end the scourge of war. It was that three-part linkage, through which the massive mobilizations forced governmental decisions that ultimately enabled UN defiance, that ultimately empowered and strengthened the world's civil society in a whole new way.

The world's sole super-power had met its match. But first, there was the empire.

## **THE NEW EMPIRE ON THE RISE**

In January 2004, Vice-President Dick Cheney struck an aggressive, not-quite-defensive tone at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, telling the gathered glitterati that "if we were a true empire, we would currently preside over a much greater piece of the earth's surface than we do. That's not the way we operate."

From the narrowest vantage point, that was true. Presiding directly over territory, as in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2002 and 2003, was never Washington's only choice of how to dominate other countries and control strategic resources. Cheney asserted what even the *New York Times* called an "unapologetic defense of the administration's threat to use military force." But however old-fashioned the current U.S. global crusade for dominion, relative to other modern efforts towards control of strategic lands and resources, the Bush administration drive towards empire necessarily must take into account the changed realities of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Of course the drive towards power and empire is not itself a new phenomenon. The rise of a single global super-power is not unprecedented – after all, the empires of Rome, the Mongols, the Byzantines, the Ottomans, the British all had their day in the sun and controlled huge swathes of territory, treasure, and people. The claims of empire – exemption from international law, enforced loyalty of the vassal states, exclusive rights to the perquisites of power – remain constant today.

The Bush junior administration, with its militarized unilateralism, was from its 2002 unelected ascension to office, bent on establishing a global force more powerful, with greater military reach, deeper cultural influence, bigger economic clout, and a greater political, strategic and diplomatic capacity than any empire that has ever existed in history.

Certainly the war in Iraq was about oil. It was certainly about expanding the U.S. military presence throughout the region, it was about creating a "weapon of mass distraction" to sway the U.S. elections in November 2004, and it was about undermining the United Nations and international law. But most of all the war was about power. And that is why the cavalier unilateralism that shaped the run-up to the war reflected such extraordinary hubris. It was the arrogance of absolute authority, the arrogance of those who claimed that because the U.S. had the power of domination, that it somehow held the *right* to dominate. It reflected the commitment to the view that because the U.S. military and nuclear arsenals dwarf all others in the world combined, that using those deadly instruments was somehow okay. Because it would be Americans wielding that overweening might, use of the power was somehow inherently, congenitally right.

Certainly the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on Washington and New York facilitated the White House's capture of false legitimacy and U.S. public acquiescence to the newly defined exigencies of empire. But Washington's drive for consolidation of a U.S. empire traces its roots not only to the expansionist dreams of the neo-conservative and militaristic cabal that formed the operational center of the George W. Bush's White House, but to ancient and not-so-ancient history itself.

What was new, relative to those earlier empires, was the staggering level of globalized power that Washington has concentrated in the new imperial center. It was not for nothing that French intellectuals at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had begun describing the U.S. as a "hyper-power." The rising U.S. empire had achieved military reach beyond the dream of any Roman legionnaire, extending indeed into space and across the very skies. It had seized access to treasure exceeding even the most predatory of King Leopold's colonial thieves. Diplomatic control tighter than that of the entire coterie of Queen Victoria's striped-pants emissaries. And cultural influence far surpassing the imagination of the most visionary Athenian philosophers.

But what was also different was that the vast reach of this newest empire was still not sufficient to withstand the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The U.S. was able to invade Iraq and capture Saddam Hussein, but its military occupation and ruthless privatization plans faced a rising military resistance as well as a huge crisis of legitimacy showing up in the widespread demands for U.S. troops to go home. The U.S. empire was willing to go to war virtually alone in the face of unprecedented UN opposition, with its narrow "coalition of the coerced" providing a false veneer of international credibility, but even years after the invasion Washington's war-shredded alliances still proved difficult to mend. The U.S. continued its uncritical economic, military and diplomatic support for Israel's occupation of Palestine, but the occupation's escalating brutality posed a serious challenge to U.S. efforts to impose regional stability and "democracy" across the Middle

East. The U.S. continued to exert significant domination over the trajectory of corporate globalization, but even the most intense U.S. efforts to reshape global trade rules could not prevent the Brazil-led Group of 21 from yanking the 2002 Cancun summit of the World Trade Organization out from under Washington's thumb.

And the fact that that the "second super-power" challenging Washington includes its own citizens, represents a key distinction between the U.S. empire and those of its ancient predecessors. Perhaps remembering that earlier empires were brought down from outside, with fire and blood and great violence, citizens of the U.S. played and continue to play a key part in building a global movement. Joining their counterparts in international civil society, a host of governments across the globe, and the United Nations itself, U.S. activists crafted campaigns aimed at bringing down this latest empire from within its own borders. Their tools would not be weapons of war, but rather the instruments of non-violence and democracy.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, the White House's efforts to impose an age of *Pax Americana* remain so far incomplete.

## **GULF WAR I SET STAGE FOR POST-COLD WAR HYPERPOWER**

In January 1991, on the eve of what would be the first U.S. war against Iraq, the great Pakistani scholar Eqbal Ahmad addressed a New York teach-in broadcast live on a nation-wide radio hookup. On that remarkable night, people gathered to listen in living rooms, union halls and church basements across the United States, seizing a moment's respite from the round-the-clock campaign that was trying, however fruitlessly, to prevent what was already understood to be an inevitable war.

Eqbal spoke of the history of war, describing how for three hundred years before that time Europe and the United States had fought wars in and for and over their colonies, and how they had devastated lands and peoples. "The seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the genocidal destruction of grand civilizations," he said. "The great Mayas, the Incas, Aztecs, and the Indian nations of North America; the conquest and subjugation of the rest of humanity. Eventually, even India was colonized; so was China, all of Africa, and ultimately the Middle East. These were the centuries that witnessed the transformation, forced and bloody, of land and labor into commodities in the capitalist sense of the word. Slavery was but one manifestation of this reality; the conversion of common land into individual estates, the wholesale dispossession of nations and peoples were the other manifestations." Whole populations were slaughtered, he said, whole civilizations were destroyed. Yet few in the colonial countries spoke of those wars.

Finally, Eqbal reminded us, "the wars of greed and expansion came home to roost. The colonial have-nots of the West took on the haves. Europeans fought a war among themselves, called it a World War, and gave it a number – One." And then some years later they fought each other again, and they called it World War II. Yet still they did not

talk about the earlier colonial wars that had wiped out populations around the world. And Eqbal looked at those sitting, rapt, in the audience in New York and spoke to all of those listening around the country, and said, "the history of our time is studded with unrecorded holocausts."<sup>3</sup>

When Washington launched its 1991 war against Iraq a few days later, when U.S. bombers lit the sky of Baghdad's night, it was clear that that war would not go unrecorded. CNN was there as the war began, broadcasting the bombing around the world. In fact, despite Washington's success at coercing the United Nations into endorsing its war, the Security Council itself and the UN Secretary General, had to learn from CNN that the war had actually started. The Council was in session that night - not on the crisis in Iraq, but on the question of Palestine. A reporter came downstairs to the Security Council chamber where a group of journalists waited. He came running, shouting: "there's something happening in the sky over Baghdad; we don't know what it is, but there is something. It's on CNN." So the Council's ambassadors and UN staff, and the secretary-general himself first learned from a UN security guard who happened to overhear the journalists' tumult, that Washington had taken the world to war.

The 1991 war and the years of sanctions that followed would do nothing to eliminate the government repression that had characterized Iraq for twenty years, repression that had been not only tolerated but succored, armed, financed and supported by the United States. But the war would lead to the destruction of much of Iraq's—and civilization's—ancient past, would undermine its modern present, and would threaten the health and very lives of its future.

Following what was called a "success" in destroying Iraq in a record short time, the use of U.S. military power increased throughout the 1990s. Invasions were often presented in the human rights-friendly language of "humanitarian intervention." The deployment of U.S. troops and U.S. bombers in Haiti, in Somalia, in Bosnia, in Kosovo, as well as the ruthless decisions to ignore growing crises deemed less than strategically important, such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, only served to increase the militarization of U.S. foreign policy and undermine the potential for non-military solutions.

Those years, with Bill Clinton's claims of "assertive multilateralism" masking the reality of a growing unilateralist trajectory, set the stage for George W. Bush's ascension to power in 2001. Even before the attacks of September 11 that year, the new Bush administration was already moving towards absolute abandonment of international law, rejection of multilateral institutions and instruments, and the emergence of a consciously asserted law of empire.

When the Bush junior administration took over in Washington, the Clinton-era trajectory of unilateral militarism, usually disguised as "humanitarian intervention," escalated. All the major players in Bush's foreign policy and international security teams agreed that with the Cold War consigned to history, and the U.S. an unrivaled global power, that it was time to assert the legitimacy, as well as the capacity, of the U.S. to declare itself leader of the world. The time for unchallenged American dominion had come.

But within that broad political agreement there was a serious strategic divide over just how that U.S. domination could best be maintained. The debate began right at the beginning of the new presidency, during the early 2001 Senate confirmation hearings for Bush's cabinet nominees. The debate was most sharply visible between Secretary of State Colin Powell on the one hand, and the Pentagon chiefs, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz on the other. The civilian leadership of the Pentagon include both old-fashioned Cold War-style nationalist/militarists like Rumsfeld, who had told Bush even before the administration came to power that he believed U.S. military power was needed "to help discipline the world."<sup>4</sup> Then there were the neo-conservative ideologues filled with visionary ideas of overthrowing tyrants and installing American-style "democracy" around the world, such as Wolfowitz and others.

The divisions within the administration could perhaps be characterized as between reliance on U.S.-dominated multilateralism (imposed by fiat and militarized when needed) on the one hand, versus a unilateralist assertion of military power as the first-choice option for an unchallenged superpower that needs to pay little attention to the interests of or pressures facing its allies.

Powell envisioned a U.S.-dominated international "consensus," however artificial or coerced it might be, in whose name U.S. policies could be imposed on the world. On the other side was what the U.S. media quickly dubbed the "Wolfowitz cabal," grouped around the Deputy Secretary and semi-official Defense Policy Board of hard-line Pentagon hawks. They saw a unilateral assertion of U.S. power, especially military power, as the first-choice option. And their belief in the perks due an unchallenged superpower led to the conviction that the U.S. need pay little attention to the views of its allies.

Under Bush military mobilization was joined by the open political legitimization of unilateralism, with specific calls for "unsigned" some treaties (the International Criminal Court), abandoning others (the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty), and rejecting those in the works (the Kyoto environmental protocol, the new protocol to strengthen the bio-weapons treaty). Combined with Bush's rhetorical shift from Clinton's claimed multilateralism to an overt and official embrace of unilateral power, countries around the world soon became very nervous. Raising a wide range of demands, people took to the streets in capitals around the world challenging Bush's aggressive assertion of U.S. power, and demanding that their governments stand up to growing U.S. pressure. In response, governments around the world made the United Nations a key venue for an ascendant diplomatic challenge to the U.S. By May 3, just five months into Bush's first term, Washington lost its seat on the UN Human Rights Commission, failing to win reelection in the "Western European and Others Group" for the first time since the Commission was created.<sup>5</sup> A month later, the U.S. lost its position on the UN's International Narcotics Control Board.

The UN moves to unseat the U.S. did not come in a vacuum. International anger was rising in response to a host of other examples of U.S. unilateralism and hypocrisy.

European diplomats explaining the Human Rights Commission vote pointed to the U.S. refusal to sign or ratify numerous treaties and international conventions including those guaranteeing the rights of women and children, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), land mine prohibitions and the International Criminal Court. There was also Washington's abandonment of the Kyoto protocol on global warming and threats (at that time still unrealized threats) to the Anti-Ballistic missile (ABM) and nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Then there was the U.S. insistence on maintaining the death penalty. And Washington's rejection of international protection for the Palestinians, most recently seen in the U.S. using its veto to prevent a Security Council resolution calling for unarmed international observers in the Occupied Territories, led to Secretary of State Powell himself admitting that the U.S. veto vote had "left a little blood on the floor."<sup>6</sup>

Unease about the unilateralist tendencies of the Bush administration had shaped international responses right from the beginning of his first term. Fears of this "retreat from international engagement" shaped headlines across the country. Newspaper editorials and pundits, already concerned about Bush's proudly proclaimed ignorance of foreign affairs, expressed discomfort about the consequences of these high-profile withdrawals from global commitments. *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman described how "America is referred to as a 'rogue state' in Europe now as often as Iraq."<sup>7</sup> Among the public, there was also some unease about the increasingly go-it-alone tendencies of U.S. policy pronouncements.

In August, 2001, even some of Bush's right-wing backers were concerned that "going it alone could get very lonely." In a *New York Times* op-ed pleading for the Bush administration to take its relationship with its allies more seriously, analysts from the far-right American Enterprise Institute and the neo-conservative Project for the New American Century criticized Bush for his "almost contemptuous rejection" of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, and his "small-minded America First" arguments against it. (They were not supporters of the treaty, one should note, but very concerned about how Bush was framing his opposition.) In a notably prescient warning – remember, this was a month *before* the September 11 attacks – they asked "how does the administration expect to convince the French to forgo lucrative oil contracts with Iraq, for example, if France's own benchmark is such a narrow definition of national interest? How will Mr. Bush persuade the Germans, who are owed billions by Iran, to take a hard line with Tehran for the cause of international security? If America defines its interests too narrowly, it cedes its claim to moral leadership – a remarkable but perishable American asset. Such a definition would also embolden other countries to define their interests in the same way."<sup>8</sup>

By the end of August, the U.S. had failed in its widely publicized effort to orchestrate a global walkout from the UN's anti-racism conference in Durban, South Africa. Pressure on the empire was mounting.

## **SEPTEMBER 11**

But just a month later came September 11. Overnight, all of the rising international opposition to Bush's unilateralism collapsed. And in the aftermath of the horrific terrorist attacks the Bush administration found a new capacity to implement the long-standing goals of the empire builders at its core. Centered particularly in the office of the civilian leadership of the Pentagon and that of Vice-President Dick Cheney, the neo-conservative ideologues had for years asserted the legitimacy of a unilateral, military thrust to advance U.S. power around the world. Throughout the 1990s, in between their stints in Washington, many of these individuals had drafted a set of working papers outlining a call for increasing the military power of the U.S. In September 2000, calling themselves the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), they issued their latest version of a plan they called "Rebuilding America's Defenses." It codified their call for massive increases in defense spending, privileging the Pentagon's role over that of the State Department or other Cabinet agencies, ratcheting up the military's capacity to fight several major theater wars simultaneously, sidelining the United Nations, and relying on military threats or pressure rather than diplomacy as the first choice of relations with other countries.

Neither PNAC nor the earlier iterations on which the paper was based reflected particularly new ideas. But before September 11, 2001, its premises were deemed far too radical to win acceptance among the American people. PNAC's own paper described the need for what it called a "catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor,"<sup>9</sup> to win public support for their strategy of global domination. The Bush administration chose to use the destruction of the World Trade Center as just such a tool to win public support for limitless war, making implementation of the right-wing extremist plan possible for the first time.

Support came from the rest of the world too, including those people and governments who had been at the center of trying to build a challenge to U.S. unilateralism only days before. But now, governments cheered and much of the world stood by as the Bush administration asserted Washington's rights of empire. "Nous sommes tous les Américains," proclaimed *Le Monde's* September 13<sup>th</sup> headline in Paris. We are all Americans.

It was as if the Bush White House had taken up the Athenian cause described in the Melian dialogues of ancient Greece. Athens, proud of its claimed commitment to justice but afraid that its fragile new democracy might be imperiled, sent emissaries to the island of Melos announcing its intention to seize the island to increase Athens' strategic reach. The Melians protested, saying "Athenians, you are known for your justice; what about justice?" The Athenians answered simply, "Justice? There is only justice among equals." For Athens and Athenians, then, democracy and international law would apply; on Melos, the laws of empire would be imposed.

## **THE EMPIRE BROOKS NO CHALLENGE**

The U.S. decision to go to war in response to Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait demonstrated that Desert Storm would be a war of choice – and the choice had little to do

with Iraq's initial invasion. After all, Iraq was a long-time, if not completely trusted, ally of the U.S. For almost a decade Washington had supported Iraq militarily and economically in its war against Iran. And Iraq was hardly the first Middle Eastern country, nor the first U.S. ally in the region, to invade and occupy a neighboring state. Long before Iraqi legions marched into Kuwait, Turkey had invaded northern Cyprus, Morocco had seized the Western Sahara, and Israel continued its illegal occupations of Palestine, of south Lebanon and of Syria's Golan Heights. In none of those land-grabs had the U.S. president thundered, as George Bush senior did following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, "this occupation will not stand!" let alone begun mobilizing U.S. troops to conquer the new occupier.

Certainly the U.S. had some regional concerns regarding the consequences of Iraq's seizure of Kuwait, including the need to maintain domination of the strategic region, consolidating control over its allies' access to Middle East oil, and protecting Israel. But the most important reason for the first Gulf War was not regional at all, but rather international – and it had everything to do with the end of the Cold War. With the Soviet Union already on the skids and about to collapse, the U.S. was concerned that in this newly uni-polar world, without the ideological justification provided by the "Soviet threat," the U.S. lacked a new public relations framework to validate its moves towards consolidating international hegemony. White House and State Department spin-masters in the Bush senior administration went to work, replacing the now-outmoded depiction of the superpower U.S. courageously battling the Soviet's evil empire, with the cool new image of the U.S. as leader of the brave new free-world coalition challenging an Arab tyrant in the name of all the nations of the world. The U.S. would even manage to coerce key Arab leaders to join its coalition, along with the last remnants of the Soviet Union itself. And in its former ally, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, whose wars and repressive rule had never bothered the U.S. before, Washington found a demonizable dictator straight out of central casting.

The quick U.S. victory in Iraq – after an air assault had bombed Iraq into what the UN's first inspection team called a "near-apocalyptic ... pre-industrial" state<sup>10</sup> – left the United States strategically unchallenged anywhere in the world by any combination of forces. In response, the U.S. intensified its assertion of the legitimacy of unilateral power, which included escalating diplomatic, economic and political pressures on UN member states, designed to keep the global organization under firm U.S. control. Throughout the next twelve years, U.S. unilateralism and domination of the UN were consolidated in the devastating economic sanctions against Iraq. Decreed in the name of the United Nations, the sanctions were in fact imposed by the United States, with Britain the always-loyal sycophant. (Washington's creation and the Pentagon's regular bombing of northern and southern "no-fly" zones in Iraq, also with British backing, was never authorized by or even mentioned in any UN resolution, although U.S. officials including presidents routinely spoke of "enforcing UN decisions" to justify the bombings.) The efforts of both George Bush Senior and Bill Clinton to legitimize unilateral U.S. attacks by forcing the UN to provide a multi-lateral fig leaf, became a U.S. habit. The pattern was broken only with the aggressive assertion of an extreme unilateralism that became the hallmark of Bush Junior's ideologically-driven administration.

## THE SECOND IRAQ WAR

It has become famously public that only hours after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attacks, the White House security team that gathered to plan the U.S. response was already discussing the desirability of war against Iraq. War against Afghanistan was an inevitable first step, but for Bush policymakers it was almost a sideshow, insignificant relative to their longstanding strategic goal of “regime change” in Iraq. Rationalizations and justifications would come and go, claims regarding Iraq’s alleged nuclear programs, its hypothetical weapons of mass destruction, its mythical links with al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, all would have their day (or, as it happened, months or even years) in screaming headlines. Only later would the claims be publicly exposed as false in careful, judiciously balanced articles relegated to small-circulation magazines or page A-17 of the mainstream press. But however dubious its justifications, the war against Iraq would go forward. This was not a war to eliminate weapons of mass destruction that didn’t exist, nor to sever an imaginary Iraqi link with al-Qaeda. This would be a war for oil, for power, and ultimately, for the exigency of empire.

As the Bush administration moved from invasion to overthrow to occupation of Iraq, it continued its broader trajectory towards international expansion of power and global reach. Bush’s infamous September 20, 2001 warning that “you’re either with us or with the terrorists” sent an unambiguous message to governments around the world: you either join our choice of response to terror, or we will treat you as if you were yourself a terrorist. The point was unequivocal.

Despite the visible failure of its policies in Iraq, despite the false claims of “transferring sovereignty” to Iraqis in September 2004 and “winning democracy” in the January 30, 2005 elections, despite the continuing bloodshed, the brutal siege of Fallujah, the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib and the continuing chaos across the country, Washington continued to declare victory. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld never wavered from his early claims that Iraq was on the road to freedom, as he blithely ignored civilian carnage and dismissed the destruction of ancient cities because, in his words, “freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.”<sup>11</sup>

However modern its weapons, the arrogance of U.S. triumphalism reflected the hubris once identified with ancient empires. Hamlet’s “insolence of office” well matches the contempt with which the Bush overlords looked down on Iraqis and on those peoples, governments, and institutions across the world who dared to defy the U.S. call to war. The 2003 U.S. war in Iraq was certainly not the first time the U.S. had unilaterally, illegally, and without justification attacked another country. But in the past -- whether Grenada, Panama, the first Gulf War, Bosnia, Somalia, even Kosovo -- Washington generally attempted to validate its wars through some kind of claim (however spurious) of international legality. In giving life to Bush’s doctrine of pre-emptive war, the 2003 assault on Iraq represents the first time a U.S. president has claimed – even boasted – that he had the *right* to launch such a unilateral attack against a country that had not attacked

the U.S. and did in fact not pose any imminent threat. International legality, in this new post-September 11 Bush era, was unnecessary, even unwelcome.

Claiming the right of pre-emptive war would not, by itself, be proof of empire. Even launching this war – which would more accurately be defined as an aggressive preventive war, since a preemptive attack requires an imminent threat – would not by itself represent such proof. But the eagerness of Washington's powerful leaders to launch this war without United Nations authorization and with such reckless disregard for legality or for consequences, with the expressed aim of toppling the government of an independent oil-rich country, however repressive (not to mention mortally wounded from war and twelve years of murderous sanctions), may represent just such proof.

Historian Paul Schroeder, writing some weeks before Washington's invasion of Iraq, concluded that the U.S. "is not an empire--not yet." He described the U.S. as "at this moment a wannabe empire, poised on the brink. The Bush Doctrine proclaims unquestionably imperialist ambitions and goals, and its armed forces are poised for war for empire--formal empire in Iraq through conquest, occupation, and indefinite political control, and informal empire over the whole Middle East through exclusive paramouncy."<sup>12</sup>

The rapid overthrow of the Baghdad regime within the first weeks after the invasion of Iraq, pushed Bush administration officials over that brink. Their smug "other Middle Eastern governments better learn their lesson" attitude reflected a fortified sense of self-righteousness and of the ostensible justice of their cause. If Washington had not yet consolidated its global empire the drive towards it was now undeniable.

Ultimately though, what is more important than the debate over whether the U.S. today is already an imperial center ready for global domination or still an empire-wannabe, is understanding the political significance and consequence of this historical moment. In mid-2005 U.S. tanks still controlled the Euphrates valley and U.S. troops still occupied the sites of the earliest recorded history of humanity. But those U.S. policymakers willing to look out beyond their own euphoria will see not only a devastated, dishonored and angry Iraq facing at best an uncertain future. The largest components of the Iraqi population, whom Washington's ideologues believed would welcome U.S. troops with rice and flowers, instead remained in the streets calling equally for "No to Saddam Hussein" and "No to the U.S. occupation" in their protests, later voting overwhelmingly for parties promising to ask the U.S. troops to leave. And as Israel's occupation of Palestine was joined by the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the result was the emergence of a humiliated and enraged Arab world, and a shattered system of U.S. alliances with weakened dictatorships throughout the Middle East. Internationally, a constellation of growing governmental opposition including Washington's closest allies, an emerging people's movement saying no to Washington's war and no to Washington's empire, and a UN at least for a brief moment joining the global mobilization for peace, rounded out the world's response to Bush's war.

If war in Iraq were the only clear imperial thrust of the Bush administration, it would be tempting to reduce it to the resource-grabbing of an oil-obsessed administration, the actions of an irresponsible hegemon soon to be taken to task by the rest of the global community. Opposition to the war could indeed be reduced to the demand of "no blood for oil." But when taken in the context of long-standing, and more visionary efforts to reshape regional and global power relations even beyond oil, the Iraq war emerges far more as exemplar of a broad and entrenched pattern, than as an isolated case of a U.S. power grab.

## **EMPIRE RISING**

That is particularly significant in light of the combination of military, political, and economic factors whose collective expansion undergirds the relentless U.S. drive for power and empire. Washington's threats against Iran, for instance, which escalated from 2004 on, made clear that overthrowing Saddam Hussein in Iraq did not signal the end of Washington's oil- strategic- and military-based ambitions in the region. The hypocrisy of the Bush administration's demand that Iran give up the rights guaranteed to it as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), including the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, was staggering. Iran had kept secret earlier nuclear activities that it later revealed to the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). But even though a new intensive inspection regime by the IAEA found no evidence of illegal weapons activities, and even though U.S. officials themselves acknowledged that Iran's enrichment activities did not violate the NPT, the U.S. launched a virulent anti-Iran campaign based on the Bush administration's "lack of trust" in Tehran.

The U.S. hypocrisy was sharp not only because of Washington's own nuclear legacy, being the only country to have used nuclear weapons and still, by a huge margin, possessor of the largest nuclear arsenal in the world. And not only because it was U.S. political and military, including nuclear, support for the shah of Iran, imposed by a CIA-backed coup in 1953 and overthrown by Khomeini's Islamic Republic in 1979, that gave rise to Tehran's nuclear capacity in the first place. But also, as former President Jimmy Carter recently wrote, "the United States is the major culprit in this erosion of the NPT. While claiming to be protecting the world from proliferation threats in Iraq, Libya, Iran and North Korea, American leaders not only have abandoned existing treaty restraints but also have asserted plans to test and develop new weapons, including anti-ballistic missiles, the earth-penetrating 'bunker buster' and perhaps some new 'small' bombs. They also have abandoned past pledges and now threaten first use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states."<sup>13</sup>

Militarily, the creation of a network of permanent bases throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, the Pentagon's techno-lethal "revolution in military affairs," the scaffolding of Israel's rise as an unchallengeable regional military and nuclear power, and most especially the public commitment to a new generation of nuclear weapons designed not for deterrence but for actual battlefield use, have contributed to a U.S. military capacity so enormous that no combination of other countries could even hope to approach, let alone match or surpass it.

Elsewhere in the world, U.S. military involvement is on the rise in Latin America, particularly in Colombia, despite important emerging gains for popular forces elsewhere on the continent, including Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia. In Africa, U.S. military aid to oil-producing countries (such as Nigeria) is on the rise. In Asia, the U.S. is rebuilding its military connections with the Philippines, and discussions are continuing with Japan regarding expansion of Tokyo's military capacity and especially eliminating Article IX of Japan's constitution that once prohibited the use of military force other than in self-defense. Washington is goading an unstable North Korea into consistently higher levels of nuclear brinksmanship, almost daring China to rise to the bait. All over the world, the U.S. is reclaiming access to bases lost earlier to the vagaries of post-Cold War and post-neo-colonial politics -- in places such as Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Philippines. The 14 new military bases under construction in U.S.-occupied Iraq are likely part of a Pentagon effort aimed at expanding its network of bases across the middle east in countries once far from hospitable to U.S. forces. And in once inaccessible arenas, long off-limits to U.S. military forces because of the Cold War or post-Soviet claims of Russian influence, U.S. bases are sprouting like mushrooms. In the oil- and gas-rich countries of the Caspian and Central Asia --in Uzbekistan, Krygyzstan, Azerbaijan, Khazakhstan and elsewhere -- U.S. bases now surround war-torn Afghanistan.

The Bush administration's September 2002 national security plan, grounded in the earlier documents of the Project for the New American Century, refers directly to maintaining the enormous chasm between the military capacity of the U.S. and the rest of the world, calling for the use of military force to insure that no nation or group of nations ever imagines even matching, let alone surpassing, U.S. prowess. The cavalier dismissal of concerns regarding increasing regional instability as a likely result of war in Iraq, reflects a rash acceptance of the PNAC view that every political challenge has a military answer. And earlier, even before September 11, abandoning the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and doing the preparation work to consign the Non-Proliferation Treaty to the dustbin of history, were part of Bush's assertion of military unilateralism as a point of legitimate principle.

Economically, both internationally and domestically, it is clear that consolidation of economic power in fewer and fewer hands remains a key strategic approach of the U.S. drive towards empire. The Bush team exhibited continuing enthusiasm for domestic tax breaks for the rich and for corporations, and a complete lack of concern with the dire domestic economic consequences of their \$300+ billion war in Iraq. The contract-grabbing and war profiteering for administration-linked companies in occupied Iraq reflected the broader privatization focus of Bush foreign policy. Abroad, the continuing moves to tighten U.S. military control over strategic oil and gas reserves in the Middle East and Central Asia were aimed at providing more economic clout to Washington vis-à-vis its economic competitors and allies. Elsewhere, the United States continued its agenda of advancing corporate trade and investment rights, as it tried to craft a new round of global trade talks in the World Trade Organization. Washington continued its blatant use of economic aid and trade agreements as carrots and sticks to bribe, threaten, and purchase coalition partners for the war in Iraq. (It should be noted, however, that it was in

this area that Washington's strategic failure was most visible. The fact that the Security Council's "Uncommitted Six" countries – Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Guinea, Mexico, Pakistan – got away with their refusal to sign on to Bush's Iraq war was clearly an important precursor to the emergence of the Brazil-led Group of 21, that stood up the U.S. and Europe at the 2003 WTO meeting in Cancun.)

Politically and diplomatically, Washington's effort to undermine the United Nations and render it "irrelevant" in the run-up to the Iraq war, clearly demonstrated the view of key White House ideologues that UN authorization was not only unnecessary but actually unwanted – damaging to the Bush holy grail of legitimizing the unilateral assertion of U.S. power. Coming on the heels of earlier rejections of treaty obligations and/or negotiations (Kyoto, ABM, the International Criminal Court, etc.) the Bush junior' administration's grudging and dismissive approach towards the UN went far beyond the Clinton administration's instrumentalist view, however cynical, of the global organization. (It was Clinton's then-UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright, after all, who in 1995 famously called the UN "a tool of American foreign policy.")

By its second term, the Bush administration was moving more powerfully than ever to expand, rather than compromise its power. Writing in the London *Guardian* the perceptive British analyst Julian Borger noted that "George Bush's Republican party does not rest on its laurels. It is at its zenith in Washington and the world beyond, and yet it is still pushing impatiently against the outer envelope of its power. ...Bush's reelection has won the grudging acceptance of European leaders, but here again the administration has shown no taste for mere consolidation. It wants to send as an envoy to the United Nations its bluntest unilateralist, John Bolton, a man who once suggested that the UN security Council would be better off with a single member, the U.S. ...It seems quite possible that the administration's supreme confidence has turned to hubris and that its overreach could yet send the wheels spinning off."<sup>14</sup>

But hubris had not yet brought down the administration. The Bush White House dismissed any notion of accountability to international law or the UN Charter. It operated instead on a litany of assertions that UN resolutions meant only what President Bush said they mean, and that anyway we don't need any UN resolutions, we have the god-given right to go to war when and where and against whom and for however long as we like.

But despite Bush's efforts the United Nations was not rendered irrelevant. To the contrary, for the crucial months in the run-up to the Iraq war and for a brief period after the war began, the UN stood at the center of the global demand for peace. As the British analyst George Monbiot wrote, the U.S. seemed "to be ripping up the global rulebook. As it does so, those of us who have campaigned against the grotesque injustices of the existing world order will quickly discover that a world with no institutions is even nastier than a world run by the wrong ones. Multilateralism, however inequitable it may be, requires certain concessions to other nations. Unilateralism means piracy: the armed robbery of the poor by the rich. The difference between today's world order and the one for which the U.S. may be preparing is the difference between mediated and unmediated force."<sup>15</sup>

## **Moving Against Empire: The Second Super-Power?**

There is no country or group of countries capable of launching a serious – rather than merely disruptive – military challenge to Washington's power drive. But for perhaps the first time since the end of the Cold War, there is a serious competitor challenging the U.S. empire for influence and authority -- global public opinion, including a mobilized international civil society, key opposition government, and the United Nations itself. Those forces include not only the protesters who took to the streets around the world to say no to war, and not only the stalwart Non-Aligned governments of South Africa, Cuba, Brazil, Malaysia, and others, although they are vital to this challenge. Not only the key U.S. allies such as France, Germany, or Russia, eager to remain on good terms with Washington yet clear about the danger of an unrestrained rogue empire. Not only the often beleaguered UN secretary general and the secretariat that he leads, facing extraordinary pressure to cave in to Washington's will yet aware that the global organization's real survival depends on its willingness and ability to stand defiant of that pressure to defend international law and the UN Charter.

No one of those three sectors of global society – people, governments and the UN – can alone successfully defy the U.S. unilateralism and militarism. But when joined, all of those forces together make up the astonishing movement towards a new internationalism that today forms the global challenge to Washington's drive towards empire. The combination of extraordinary events in mid-February 2003 – the unprecedented Security Council response to France's then-Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin's call to defend the UN as an instrument of peace and not a tool for war; the refusal of the Council's member states to accede to U.S. demands to endorse the war, and the outpouring of millions across the globe on February 15 – provided even clearer evidence that a critical historical juncture was at hand. The *New York Times*' definition of this moment as proof that once again there were two superpowers in the world, made clear that even the most powerful were hearing the voices of those pounding on the empire's walls.

Although that global movement against war in Iraq failed to stop the U.S. onslaught, it did insure that when the war was launched, there could be no denying that it was an illegal, unauthorized, unilateral war. This would not be the Gulf War of Bush Senior, whose bribes, threats and punishments forced sufficient Security Council votes to officially authorize the immoral 1991 war against Iraq. This time the effort at legitimation failed, and the U.S., backed only by Tony Blair in Britain and a few other governments eager to remain in Washington's pocket, went to war alone.

The global movement against war quickly moved into the process of transformation into a movement against the emerging U.S. empire. Many of the speakers at many of the February 15, 2003 rallies around the world hit the same point -- this war, and this anti-war movement, were no longer just about Iraq. This was about mobilizing the world against the U.S. policies and the rising empire they represented. To the shock of ideologically-driven White House policymakers and analysts, European and other

governments began to recognize that the need to constrain the U.S. was as urgent – perhaps even more so – as the need to restrain Baghdad, and that effort was reflected in the UN debate. Writing in the *New York Times* magazine, James Traub quoted an unnamed UN official confirming that Security Council "members ended up feeling that they had to stand up to American unilateralism."<sup>16</sup>

It was in this context that the conscious struggle – again with the UN as the primary venue – emerged among Europeans. "Old Europe" – led by France and Germany – recognized the danger of ignoring the rise of U.S. power, and sought to go almost public with the once-hidden goal of building Europe as an explicit counterweight to the U.S. Anti-war sentiment in France, Germany and elsewhere made it possible – indeed virtually mandatory – for those governments to stand defiant of the U.S. in the Security Council. Public opinion against the war and against Bush transformed what likely began as the governments' tactical disagreements with Washington, into immutable opposition. Even the governments of "new Europe," particularly the weaker and poorer Eastern European states aspiring to EU and NATO membership, and still caught up in the hope of taking advantage of the EU's generous cash benefits while keeping their strategic eggs solidly in Washington's basket, faced 65-80% public opposition to their support for Bush's war. Differences over the nature of an expanded Europe, then, emerged as a crucial sub-text within international debates over the war.

The events of February 15 transformed a widespread anti-war sentiment into a powerful global movement, one that was mobilized across the world around the same demand – The World Says No to War. It wasn't simply a matter of simultaneous demonstrations – there was the qualitatively greater power that comes from a shared framework (even if spontaneous and rudimentary rather than conscious and comprehensive) of resistance to empire. It was that connection and coordination that set in motion Washington's recognition, however grudging, of the importance of the global movement – an internationalist movement that could, only when its three component parts were joined in unified defiance, challenge the rise of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's dominant empire.

---

This is the Introduction to *Challenging Empire: How People, Governments and the UN Defy U.S. Power* by Phyllis Bennis. Available from Interlink Publishing, at [www.interlinkbooks.com](http://www.interlinkbooks.com) or 413) 582-7054.

---

<sup>1</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, "A New Power in the Streets," *New York Times*, 17 February 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these concepts regarding the role of U.S. citizens rely on ideas developed in *Citizens of the Empire: The Struggle to Claim Our Humanity*, Robert Jensen, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Eqbal Ahmad, "Portent of a New Century," Introduction, *Beyond the Storm: A Gulf Crisis Reader*, Phyllis Bennis and Michel Moushabeck, eds., Interlink Publishing Group, Northampton, MA, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Bob Woodward and Dan Balz, "'We Will Rally the World'," *Washington Post*, 28 January 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Many reports, aimed at discrediting the UN Human Rights Commission, falsely claimed that the U.S. "was replaced by Sudan" on the Commission. In fact, membership in the Commission is determined by election within regional groups. Sudan was elected by the African group, which uses a rotation system including all its members. Washington lost its seat in a completely separate process, when members of the Cold War-era "Western Europe and Others Group" voted for Sweden rather than the U.S.

<sup>6</sup> "House Threatens to Hold Back U.N. Dues for Loss of Seat," David E. Sanger, *New York Times*, 9 May 2001.

<sup>7</sup> "Noblesse Oblige," Tom Friedman, *New York Times*, 31 July 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Gedmin and Gary Schmitt, "Allies in America's National Interest," *New York Times*, August 5, 2001.

---

<sup>9</sup> "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century," Project for the New American Century, September 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Martti Ahtisaari, Report of the United Nations Mission to Assess Humanitarian Needs in Iraq, March 20, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> April 11, 2003, CNN, at <[www.cnn.com/2003/US/04/11/sprj.irq.pentagon/](http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/04/11/sprj.irq.pentagon/)>.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Schroeder, The History News Network, Center for History and the New Media, George Mason University, February 3, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Saving Nonproliferation," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Julian Borger, "March of Triumph Hits Skiddy Patch," *Guardian Weekly*, April 29-May 5, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> George Monbiot, *The Guardian*, 25 February 2003.

<sup>16</sup> James Traub, "The Next Resolution," *New York Times* magazine, 13 April 2003.