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War and Empire: the American Way of Life

By Paul Atwood

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A few months ago I received a message from a professor at the Khomeini Institute for Education and Research in Tehran, Iran, informing me that my 2010 book “War and Empire: The American Way of Life” (London, Pluto Press) had been translated into Farsi. He requested that I write an Introduction for Iranian readers. What follows is that Introduction. Two years ago the Xinhua Peoples’ Press in Beijing, China also published a translation in Mandarin.

In the aftermath of Saddam Hussein’s 1991 attempt to annex Kuwait the U.S. deliberately destroyed much of Iraq’s water and sewer infrastructure. The Pentagon even admitted on its website that these acts would lead to mass outbreaks of disease. These were certifiable war crimes under international law. After Saddam’s defeat the U.S. also imposed widespread sanctions on his regime that included preventing necessary medicines from reaching Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens perished as a result. In an infamous interview in 1996 Madeleine Albright, then the Secretary of State, was asked to justify the deaths of 500,000 children. She defended these atrocities by saying “I think this is a very hard choice but we think the price is worth it.” Twenty-one years have elapsed since Albright uttered her rationalization of this vicious barbarity and it has been virtually “disappeared” from the collective memory of Americans. But it is far from being the only one.

Today much the same is being visited upon the children of Mosul, Syria and Yemen. Fifty thousand more marines are slated for deployment to Afghanistan and the new Defense Secretary’s bellicose rhetoric threatens Iran.

When I undertook to write this book I could not imagine that it would ever be translated into Farsi or Mandarin Chinese. Over the course of my teaching career I had become increasingly concerned about the vacancy of knowledge about their nation’s past on the part of my students and by extension many millions of my fellow American citizens. This condition of ignorance is the effect of the incomplete and, too often, dishonest orthodoxy in required school texts and by the distortion of the real past by popular culture, Hollywood films and corporate controlled network television, especially the purported “news.” George Orwell was correct. “Who controls the present controls the past.” What the majority of Americans are conditioned to think they know about their past (and that of many other peoples) is myth, and too often, sheer illusion. Misdirection and manipulation about proclaimed threats from abroad since 1945 has led directly into wars and unjust armed interventions and coups in many other nations. The results are always tragic on a colossal scale.

None of this is accidental or new. Since the end of World War II the U.S. ruling elites have set forth an agenda claimed to foster what they call a “liberal world order” in which democracy and human rights for all are the declared goals. But little about real U.S. actions in the world supports these claims. Washington has overthrown elected governments and waged catastrophic war upon helpless civilians in many nations since 1945. The public is told that national security and “vital interests” are at stake and the corporate controlled media ensure that key realities are omitted, or distorted. It is no secret that today much of the human species is living in existential crisis- whether from war, economic exploitation or dire effects of climate change- and the profound ignorance about how the past shapes the present is a major factor in our failure to fashion a more

peaceful and beneficial future. This volume is simply an attempt to illuminate much of the hidden history of the United States in the hope that more citizens in the United States will realize that we cannot continue on this destructive path and must find a way to cooperate with other nations instead of seeking to dominate them or outcompete them in a self-defeating contest for diminishing resources. Many American officials pay lip service to international cooperation but they really mean collaboration with the overarching American agenda.

The words of those who have formulated the grand strategy for American global dominance since the U.S. emerged as the most militarily dominant nation after WWII must be taken seriously but desires for global dominance were evident long before. Consider the oft-quoted language of George F. Kennan, the U.S. State Department's architect of the Cold War with the Soviet Union immediately after World War II. In a top secret document circulated only to other key officials he took notice of the fact that the American population was (in 1948) only 6.3% of the world's but that the U.S. effectively controlled about 50% of the world's resources. The object of U.S. policy, he declared, should be to maintain that disparity and employ "straight power tactics" to enforce this global inequality, while avoiding all rhetoric about commitment to human rights, raising other peoples' living standards, democratization and the like. Kennan's vision, coupled with the U.S. creation of the World Bank and International Monetary fund, anticipated a globalized economy under firm control by American and allied European banks and industries, and backed by American firepower.

Much closer in time to the present is the comprehensive plan for complete American dominance of the planet projected in brutally frank and exacting detail by former national security chief Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geo-strategic Imperatives*.

Eurasia is the globe's largest continent and is geopolitically axial. A power that dominates Asia would dominate two of the three most advanced and economically productive regions. A mere glance at the map also suggests that control over Eurasia would almost automatically entail Africa's subordination...About 75 percent of the world's people live in Eurasia and most of the world's wealth is there as well...Eurasia accounts for about three-fourths of the world's energy resources.

Upon assuming the presidency of the U.S. in 2001 George W. Bush filled his administration with so called Neo-Conservatives, members of the *Project for a New American Century*, who, with their allies in the Pentagon, called for nothing less than "full spectrum dominance" of planet Earth. Exploiting the hysteria mounted in the U.S. after the events of September 11, 2001 Bush II then proceeded to call for all-out war against what he termed the "axis of evil." General Wesley Clark, a 2004 Democratic Party candidate for president, later revealed that the Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld Administration had secret plans all along to overthrow the governments of Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Somalia and Sudan, and "finish off" Iran. All that was needed was a "new Pearl Harbor" and the events of September 11, 2001 provided that pretext, launching a state of permanent war primarily against the Muslim world.

Citizens of the U.S., like myself, who have long studied these matters and have opposed our nation's imperial policies know that what these men, and many others like them, have proposed

is exactly what they accused Nazi Germany and Communist Russia of attempting. Of course, proponents of what the first Bush deemed the “New World Order” in 1991 allege that this American imperium will constitute a radical departure from past empires and will instead usher in and guarantee a new age of democracy and human rights for all humanity. They assert this even as their bombs and those of their allies shatter the lives literally of millions in the Islamic world.

The U.S. began its history as a colony of the early British Empire and an outpost of nascent capitalism though this essential fact is de-emphasized in standard accounts in favor of the claim that the primary incentive for the colonial project was “freedom of religion.” The earliest British colonies in North America, Virginia and Massachusetts, were established as joint-stock companies, precursors of the modern corporation, to return profits to the mother country from resources of fish, game, furs, lumber and later, tobacco, cotton and the industries that followed. Acquisition of these valued assets required the conquest, displacement or extermination of the native populations already living here. The name, Massachusetts, for example, the state where I live, is all that remains of the people who once inhabited the area of what is now Boston. Later, the profits derived from forcible acquisition of the land, and the slave labor to cultivate it underwrote the industrial revolution and this catapulted the United States into position as the richest nation on earth and soon the militarily most powerful.

Only a century after breaking away from British rule the United States itself leapt upon the stage of empire to compete with other Europeans for dominance in the world, taking the former Spanish colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam by force, and annexing Hawaii. Brooks Adams, the descendant of two presidents, exulted that “this war is the first gun in the battle for ownership of the world.” In the Senate Albert Beveridge proclaimed that “The power that rules the Pacific rules the world.”

U.S. entry into both World Wars and all subsequent armed interventions is almost always mystified and characterized as a defense of democracy and human rights. In no case was American national security remotely threatened if by that we mean the vulnerability to invasion and military defeat.

Since the end of World War II the United States has waged numerous full scale wars and many smaller conflicts in the name of national security and claims of principle and high ideals. Americans are unremittingly habituated to believe Madeleine Albright’s all-encompassing contention that the United States is “the indispensable nation.” The end result of our actions has been many millions dead, maimed, reduced to penury, and desolated with grief. Americans are encouraged to see ourselves as humanitarians yet the widespread denial of our collective responsibility for the raw misery for those on the receiving end of our military firepower is nothing less than indefensible.

Until WWII the U.S. was perceived, if not exactly as a benevolent friend of Muslim peoples, at least it was not yet seen as one more imperial power set upon exploiting the greater Middle East. This positive estimation changed virtually the moment that war ended and the regional shift toward virulent anti-Americanism originated in Iran.

During World War II Iran had been co-occupied by Soviet, British and American troops. The Allies violated Iran's declared neutrality because they thought that the country's ruler, Reza Shah, was too friendly with Nazi Germany and they wished to use Iranian territory to transship supplies from the Persian Gulf to the USSR. The British owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now British Petroleum) had virtually monopolized production and profits from the industry and the Allies also wanted to prevent the country's oil reserves from potential access by Germany. The three nations had agreed to withdraw from Iran within six months after the war's end. In March of 1946 Soviet troops had still not withdrawn and Washington claimed that this was evidence of Stalin's desire to expand communism and threaten the entire region. The reality was that the Soviet Union had suffered immense damage from the war and needed energy supplies to rebuild. Russians wanted some guarantee from Iran that they could purchase a certain quota of Iranian oil for this purpose and sought to gain an oil concession in the Azerbaijani region of Iran, which bordered the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. Washington and the Iranian government feared that the Soviets might act to annex the territory when Iranian Azerbaijanis declared a separate republic. President Truman later claimed that he threatened the USSR with American military intervention. The U.S. State Department advised the Iranian prime minister, Ahmad Qavam, to negotiate and when Iran accepted the oil concession the Red Army withdrew. However, the Iranian parliament, the *Majlis*, later disavowed the agreement.

These actions undertaken by Washington constituted the first direct American intervention in the Middle East as well as the first skirmish of the post-WWII Cold War. Anti-Soviet rhetoric claimed that the Soviet Union was bent on "world conquest" and pointed to the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army. Omitted was all mention of the fact that as Nazi Germany had marched through the nations of Eastern Europe it had subjected their governments and made them allies. Then many waged war themselves against the USSR. Thus, the Red Army was occupying those nations for the same reason the United States and Britain were occupying Germany, Austria and Italy. American elites had plans for the reconstruction of Europe that would reintegrate the entire region into a revived capitalist order under American authority and communist Russia's occupation of Eastern Europe was seen to obstruct those goals. No consideration was given to the very real security concerns that the Soviets had, especially about their eastern borders from whence twice in the early 20th Century they had been invaded.

In fact, Russian non-actions at the time, not only with respect to Iran, indicated exactly the opposite of what Washington wanted the world to believe. The Red Army could easily have re-entered Iranian territory after the *Majlis* reneged on the oil concession and there was nothing, short of the atomic bomb that could have dislodged them. But it did not. Within a few years Soviet troops also withdrew from Austria and Manchuria quite in contradiction to the American assertion that they were intent on global conquest. There was no evidence whatever of Soviet designs to expand beyond what it declared to be its security zone in Eastern Europe. The U.S. had committed itself to an adversarial relationship with its former ally, in the absence of which the Nazis would never have been defeated, and it had initiated its long-term intervention into the internal affairs of Iran and many other nations, which, of course, continue to this day.

When the Shah was overthrown in 1979 few Americans had any sense of why this occurred, especially because most journalists supinely omitted any reportage of crimes committed by the "king of kings" against the Iranian people. The public had been conditioned to believe for

decades that Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi was a benevolent sovereign, beloved by his people, a staunch ally of the United States, and a pillar of stability in the region. Most had no sense that the Shah was installed by the Central Intelligence Agency when it conspired with other Iranians to topple the *elected* government of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 because he had the temerity to insist that the oil resources of his nation were the birthright of the Iranian people rather than the property of western oil companies. The public had no understanding of how brutal the Shah's dictatorship was in fact and no comprehension of the role Washington had played in enabling his feared secret police, the SAVAK, to terrorize all Iranians who objected to his policies. To the extent that the general public took any notice at all of Iran they accepted the claim that the Shah was America's "policeman in the Gulf," aiding the United States in its efforts to "contain" the threat of the Soviet Union.

The real menace to the interests of American corporate elites emanated from the upsurge in nationalism among all peoples around the globe who had been victims of western colonialism. World War II effectively finished Europe's empires and nations from Indonesia, Vietnam, India, to Kenya, Congo, Guatemala, Cuba, Chile and many others were rising in the post-war period to obtain independence, and who, like Iran in the early 1950s, sought to *nationalize* their resources. From the perspective of the would-be American overlords this was their cardinal sin. Such appropriations of national reserves like Vietnam's independence movement, Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal, Mossadegh's actions, or Qassim's appropriations of oil in Iraq in 1956, if successfully carried out and allowed to stand, would have thwarted the grand strategy of the U.S. to exert American corporate control over such assets, markets and cheaper foreign labor and the immense profits that would accrue to American industrial and banking giants. Since communist ideology also promoted national independence for western colonies intense government and media propaganda convinced the American citizenry that resistance to the American agenda and global turmoil was all the work of the Soviet devil.

Even before WWII ended key members of the ruling elite sought preventive measures against a return to depression and mass unemployment. Sixteen million veterans were returning to civilian life. Would they face renewed unemployment and soup kitchens as so many had in the Great Depression of the 1930s? The director of war production, who had formerly been chief executive officer of the General Electric Company, a giant in what President Dwight Eisenhower would later designate the "Military-Industrial Complex," argued that the U.S. needed a "permanent war economy." Many of the massive corporations that now dominate the American political economy either grew exponentially during WWII or got their start as a result of government contracts financed by new taxation and borrowing. Only such massive government intervention put citizens back to work or in the military regiments. Given the nature of capitalism few among elite decision makers in the postwar could imagine restructuring such production to meet purely domestic purposes primarily because there was less profit to be made. War or the manufactured threat of war is the lifeblood of the military corporations and their financiers.

Thus the ally that had been indispensable in the defeat of Nazism overnight became the new menace to American national security, despite the fact that the USSR had suffered upwards of 30 million deaths and its principal cities lay in ruins. From that moment on the "Cold War" became the ideological organizing touchstone of American society. Even then many citizens resisted the new precepts. Henry Wallace, who had been vice president under Roosevelt, led the popular

movement for cooperation between the two post-war giants but he was reviled by the high priests of political orthodoxy as a “fellow traveler” of the communists, as were any who dissented from the new agenda.

Inside the inner sanctum of the new “National Security State” a top secret document, NSC-68, specified a comprehensive blueprint to militarize American society, called for a tripling of taxation to expand the military budget and achieve nuclear supremacy by creating the hydrogen bomb. Even so the populace resisted until in the words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson “Thank God Korea came along.” Though Acheson himself had declared that Korea was outside of America’s “defensive perimeter,” warhawks in Washington and on Wall Street declared that the civil war between Korean factions on the other side of the planet imperiled the “free world.” What actually was at risk was the new militarized superstate, and the tax guaranteed profits to the corporations embedded in the war economy. The war that followed left 3 million Koreans and 37,000 US soldiers dead, threatened China with nuclear destruction, leading the Chinese to deploy their own nukes in short order.

To cite only some cases, from 1947 to the present the United States has intervened politically or violently in Iran, China, Ukraine, Italy, Greece, Egypt, Vietnam, Guatemala, Indonesia, Congo, Cuba, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Cambodia, Laos, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and most recently has intruded brutally in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Syria. Though internal domestic opposition to American interventions and wars has always surfaced the majority of the public historically succumbs to the incessant propaganda projected by U.S. governments of either party and their corporate allies and the media that military action is necessary for reasons of national security or to protect favored allies.

Recently “humanitarian intervention” has surfaced as justification for American deployments in Muslim countries. The doctrine’s principal exponent, former UN ambassador Samantha Power, was instrumental in toppling the Libyan regime of Muammar Qaddafi, with catastrophic results for innumerable civilians. Along with her boss Hillary Clinton, and National Security adviser Susan Rice, these “gentle” women also encouraged the Obama administration to support and arm the rebellion against the Assad regime in Syria leading to today’s incessantly violent chaos, uncountable deaths, the outflow of hundreds of thousands of refugees and the destabilization of numerous nations from Africa to Europe.

In 1991 the pretext of the communist menace disappeared with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. That brief window of peaceful cooperation closed rapidly and Russia was soon demonized again as the principal menace to “liberal order.” The Trump Administration won election in great part because it promised a more cooperative relationship with Russia, one of the only rays of light in that dismal campaign. But what is now termed the American “deep state” is fostering a renewed condition of militarized tension with that nation. Trump also promised millions that he would renew the American economy and bring back jobs for millions who feel betrayed and impoverished by the flight of investment capital overseas in search of cheaper labor and the robotization of such industries that remain. “America First” is Trump’s watchword. Yet he has turned management of the U.S. economy over to the very bankers who orchestrated the swindles that led to the near collapse of the world economy in 2008.

As I write these words Trump has launched missiles at a Syrian airfield, employed the U.S.'s deadliest weapon short of nukes in Afghanistan, bombed Yemen, and sent troops to Somalia. His Secretary of Defense, former General James Mattis, affectionately called "mad dog" by his troops, threatens Iran, falsely accusing it of violations of the recently signed agreement on nuclear proliferation. Trump is recklessly threatening North Korea, potentially creating an extreme risk of a nuclear event that would certainly also engage China. He has called for an increase in military spending that by itself is almost larger than the entire military budget of any other country. Despite promises of prosperity for all the taxes to fund all this will fall on the shoulders of the broad American middle class and generations to come, not on the giant corporations that are all but tax exempt- as it appears Trump himself has been for decades. Rather than sanely reducing the risk of war as he promised his presidency looks increasingly worrying. As his foreign policies take shape they are indistinguishable from those of his Democratic Party opponents and the global dominance doctrines of Bush's neo-conservatives. Are They all fated to fail and unless derailed ensure yet more widespread war and suffering.