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US imperialism and the proxy war in Syria

By David North

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The following lecture was delivered September 17, 2013 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor by David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

“Peace in Our Time”?

Up until one week ago, it appeared that the Obama administration was about to order the bombing of Syria. However, on Monday, September 9, Secretary of State John Kerry made his now famous statement indicating that war could be avoided if Syria agreed to destroy its stockpiles of chemical weapons. Whether this statement was an off-the-cuff remark or a carefully planned diplomatic masterstroke—a maneuver so ingenious and subtle that even a Talleyrand would have been impressed—is not known. Given the confusion that found expression in the initial responses of State Department and White House spokesmen, the argument could be plausibly made that Kerry, who is not an especially intelligent man, had not thought through the implications of his response to a reporter’s question. On the other hand, an argument could be made that Kerry’s seemingly ad-libbed statement arose from secret discussions that had been held with Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov.

Whatever the truth may be, there is no question but that the Obama administration's rush to war had confronted political problems that had not been foreseen when it was announced, based on unsubstantiated allegations that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had ordered a chemical weapons attack, that the United States would carry out a punitive military strike against Syria.

The Obama administration's decision to attack Syria quickly with a massive aerial bombardment was determined by the desperate situation confronting the US-backed rebel forces. In 2012, Obama declared that Assad would have to give up power. As of 2013, the United States and its Gulf State allies, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, had poured billions of dollars into the anti-Assad insurgency. Obama had been assured by the CIA that the insurgency would be successful. However, with the support of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Assad's forces had gone on the offensive. A report published on June 6 by the Institute for the Study of War stated that an offensive launched by the regime against the rebel-held town of al-Qusayr "effectively altered the balance of power on the ground and serves as a critical turning point in the civil war."

The Institute for the Study of War (a research group that seeks to articulate a strategy for the US military) argued that "the international community [i.e., the US and its allies] will have to do something to decisively change the balance of power on the ground ahead of negotiations." On July 25, 2013, leaders of the Syrian opposition—in reality, political agents of the United States—met with John Kerry. In the course of a meeting that lasted nearly one hour, they informed the secretary that the situation was "desperate" and called for swift action by the United States to forestall the collapse of the insurgency.

Less than a month passed between the fateful July 25 meeting between the Syrian opposition and the secretary of state and the poison gas attack of August 21. The connection between the two events—the meeting with its desperate pleas for American military action and the mysterious gas attack only 27 days later—is all but obvious. The realization that the war was going against the insurgents—who are led by CIA and Saudi flunkies—impelled the US to play its "chemical weapons" card as a pretext for a military attack. Unlike the Assad government, which was defeating the CIA-backed insurgency and had no reason to deploy chemical weapons, the United States, its allies and the insurgents desperately needed a dramatic event that could be used to justify the bombardment of Damascus. One can be reasonably certain that the CIA knows far more about the planning and execution of the poison gas attack than Bashar al-Assad. The Obama administration calculated that a US attack would shatter the offensive capabilities of the Syrian government and tip the military advantage to the insurgency. At the very least, in the event of negotiations to end the civil war, military action would serve as a means of strengthening the position of the US and its Gulf States allies.

That was the plan! What was not foreseen was the overwhelming popular opposition within the United States and Europe to yet another war. Despite all the efforts of the media—which I will discuss later—the broad mass of the people were not buying into the pro-war propaganda. This

time, even as the media wildly pressed all the familiar buttons, the public failed to react as expected. The first sign of serious trouble came on August 29, when the war resolution introduced by British Prime Minister Cameron was voted down. Deprived of the cover of an international coalition, Obama decided that he needed a congressional resolution to provide the war with political legitimacy. The initial indications were that Congress would adopt a resolution authorizing an attack. The leaders of both parties in the Senate and House declared their support.

But congress was overwhelmed by the outpouring of opposition. In many constituencies, popular sentiment—as measured by letters to representatives—was running 9 to 1 against an attack. In one memorable incident, Senator John McCain was denounced at a town hall meeting. The lies that had been told to obtain support for the now discredited wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had not been forgotten.

By last weekend, it had become obvious that the Obama administration and the entire political establishment were disoriented by the popular resistance to the war. Living in a world of manufactured public opinion, they were not prepared for the expression of real public opinion. Even if Kerry's fumbling remark on September 9 was a political slip, the secretary's confusion reflected the confusion within the administration.

Despite the initial efforts of White House and State Department spokesmen to dismiss Kerry's suggestion that war could be avoided as a mere rhetorical exercise, the Obama administration shifted course later in the day and indicated a willingness to call off immediate military action, pending the destruction of Syria's chemical warfare arsenal.

It seems that the immediate threat of another major US military intervention has receded. But the postponement of war does not lessen the likelihood, indeed, the inevitability, of the outbreak of a major war. As the bellicose statements emanating from Washington make clear, the "military option" remains on the table. Nor is Syria the only target for military attack. US operations against Syria would set the stage for a clash with Iran. And, still further, the logic of US imperialism's drive for global dominance leads to a confrontation with Russia and China. Nor can it be excluded that the conflict of interests among the major imperialist powers—for example, the United States and Germany—might under certain conditions metastasize into armed conflict.

The danger of war does not arise out of one or another local dispute or conflict, but out of the logic of the crisis of US and world capitalism. Prior to the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and World War II in 1939, there were a number of significant "war scares." On several occasions, the major powers were brought to the brink of war, only to pull back at the last minute. The crisis of September 1938, when Hitler's demand for the annexation of a strategic section of Czechoslovakia (the Sudetenland) seemed to make war unavoidable, was concluded when British Prime Minister Chamberlain acceded to Nazi Germany's ultimatum. Chamberlain returned to England proclaiming that the agreement had secured "peace in our time." There was

general jubilation among the masses of people. Even within Germany, the popular sentiment was—to Hitler’s great displeasure—overwhelmingly against war.

But as Trotsky warned in 1938, “imperialist antagonisms reach a bloody impasse at the height of which separate clashes and bloody local disturbances... must inevitably coalesce into a conflagration of world dimensions.” Within a year, World War II had broken out.

The diplomatic games and intrigues in which Mr. Obama and Mr. Putin engage cannot alter the fundamental trajectory of imperialism. Even if the bombardment of Syria has been delayed, the interests and contradictions that lead to war persist and will not be resolved peacefully. The United States, France, Britain and the Gulf States are expanding their financial and logistical support for the anti-Assad rebels.

The United States and Syria

The most striking characteristic of the media coverage and presentation of the Obama administration’s preparations for a military attack on Syria is the complete absence of any examination of the historical context, legal implications (from the standpoint of international law), or political motivations. Everything that is stated or claimed by the US government is taken at face value, as if its veracity is beyond doubt. Though the Obama administration was not able and did not even attempt to present any convincing physical and forensic evidence that the Assad regime was responsible for the alleged chemical weapons attack, let alone provide a motive that would explain why Assad would cross the “Red Line” and risk a US attack, the establishment press and media immediately and completely accepted the administration’s story. The people who run these institutions are not stupid or naïve. They know that the administration is lying in order to implement an unstated and hidden agenda. But the media functions entirely as an instrument of propaganda.

The media simply ignores the legal implications of an attack on Syria, which would be a violation of international law.

There is no historical context whatever. The public is led to believe that the role of the US is entirely altruistic, driven by compassion for the suffering of the Syrian people, who are being oppressed by a ruthless dictator—or, as George H. W. Bush said of Saddam Hussein in 1990: “Hitler revisited.” There are references in the media to 100,000 dead in the civil war, as if the US is merely a horrified bystander, bearing no responsibility whatever for the bloody events in that country.

Even comparatively well-informed Americans, who have been following the news attentively as this crisis unfolded, would not have come across any of the following facts that are of critical importance to an understanding of the policies of the Obama administration.

The United States has a long history, stretching all the way back to the 1940s, of direct intervention in Syria and subversion of its governments. Once France, the old colonial power, was forced in 1946—under pressure from the US—to cede formal independence to Syria, the Truman administration sought to assure that the post-colonial regime would protect American corporate-financial interests (centered on the oil industry) and accept the dictates of the United States' Cold War anti-Soviet strategy. This meant, above all, supporting all US efforts to block the growth of the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East and suppressing communist and other left wing movements in the country.

In 1948-49, the Truman administration was alarmed by the growth of the Syrian Communist Party and the increasingly friendly relations between the left-bourgeois nationalist regime of President Shukri Quwatly and the Soviet Union. After months of preparation by the CIA, Syrian Army Chief of Staff Husni Zaim overthrew Quwatly on March 30, 1949. The guiding role of the US in the coup has been well-documented. According to Professor Douglas Little, a specialist in Syrian history and politics:

Recently declassified records... confirm that beginning on November 30, 1948, [CIA operative Stephen] Meade met secretly with Colonel Zaim at least six times to discuss the “possibility [of an] army supported dictatorship. [“Cold War and Covert Action: The United States and Syria, 1945-1958, *Middle East Journal*, Winter 1990, p. 55]

There was some concern in the Truman administration that the unpopularity of the Zaim regime might prove a political liability. But Zaim's performance as Syrian strongman in the aftermath of the coup delighted Washington:

On 16 May, Zaim approved the long-delayed TAPLINE concession, removing the final obstacle to ARAMCO's [Arab American Oil Company] plan to pipe Saudi oil to the Mediterranean. Two weeks later he broadened his anti-Soviet campaign by banning the Communist Party and jailing dozens of left-wing dissidents. [Ibid]

However, Zaim was intensely unpopular and he was overthrown on August 14, less than five months after seizing power, and executed. But despite this setback, the CIA found another military figure, Col. Adib Shishakli, who came to power in a coup organized with US support on December 19, 1949. Shishakli's pro-US regime lasted until February 1954, when it was overthrown in a bloodless coup. Shishakli was eventually assassinated in Brazil in 1964. But his death did not end the involvement of the Shishakli family in Syrian politics. His grandson and namesake, Adib Shishakli, a right-wing businessman with close ties to the Saudi royal family, is a leading member of the Syrian Opposition. He was among those who participated in the July 25 meeting with Secretary Kerry at the United Nations.

After the 1954 overthrow of Col. Shishakli, the US was dissatisfied with the renewed growth of the left and a rising tide of popular resentment of American meddling in Syrian politics. The

Eisenhower administration was troubled by the popularity of the “progressive front,” which was backed by elements in the Syrian army led by Colonel Adnan Malki. The United States was particularly angry that Malki’s faction opposed Syrian membership in the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact, modeled on NATO, which the Eisenhower administration set up in January 1955. On April 22, 1955, Malki was assassinated while attending a soccer match by a member of the pro-US and right-wing Syrian Social National Party. An official investigation into the assassination found that the US was a major supporter and financier of the SSNP. It was well known that the SSNP had close ties with the CIA.

In the aftermath of Malki’s assassination, a wave of popular outrage ensured the election of Quwatly to the presidency in August 1955. The US, dissatisfied with the outcome of the election and the new regime’s closer ties with the Soviet Union, set out to organize yet another coup. Working closely with its counterparts in British intelligence, the CIA and the British SIS developed Operation Straggle. In what appears today to be an early model of the present US-orchestrated “rebel” insurgency:

The original CIA-SIS plan appears to have called for Turkey to stage border incidents, British operatives to stir up the desert tribes, and American agents to mobilize SSNP guerillas, all of which would trigger a pro-Western coup by “indigenous anticommunist elements within Syria” supported, if necessary, by Iraqi troops. What Washington perceived as a deteriorating situation in Damascus made Straggle more and more attractive. [Little, p. 66]

The coup planned by the CIA was scheduled to take place on October 25, 1956. The CIA had provided \$150,000 to the conspirators. But the operation was postponed because the British, without informing the US, had initiated another operation—the disastrous invasion of Egypt that ended in a political humiliation for Britain. Though delayed, US plans for the eventual overthrow of the Syrian government continued. In January 1957, the administration proclaimed the Eisenhower Doctrine, which asserted the intent of the US to use troops to counter Soviet influence in the Middle East. This doctrine was overwhelmingly ratified by both houses of Congress.

Operation Straggle was refurbished and renamed Operation Wappen. According to Professor Little:

Howard Stone, a CIA political action specialist with experience in Tehran and Khartoum, had been planning a coup with dissidents inside the Syrian army for three months. Meanwhile, former president Adib Shishakli secretly arrived in Beirut, where he assured Kermit Roosevelt that he was ready to reassume power in Syria. [Little, p. 71]

Unfortunately for the United States, Syrian intelligence was well informed of the US-backed conspiracy. On August 12, 1957, the Syrian counterintelligence chief expelled Stone and other CIA plotters and rounded up their operatives within the country. The Eisenhower administration

was furious and considered a military intervention, but backed off when it received a blunt message from the Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev, warning Eisenhower not to intervene.

The continuous and relentless efforts of the United States to exert control over Syria left a legacy of resentment and bitterness. As Professor Little observes, “by the mid-1950s Syrian leaders as diverse as the moderate Quwatly and the communist Bakdash were using rumors of CIA conspiracies, most of them all too true, to whip up the hatred for the United States that Eisenhower so lamented.” [Little, p. 75]

The post-Soviet drive for global hegemony

The efforts of the US to subvert Syria did not end with the Cold War. In fact, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, there no longer existed a country that might place some restraint on the exercise of US military power. The decision of the United States to go to war against Iraq in 1990-91—once it had become clear that the Soviet Union was heading rapidly to dissolution—was a herald of what the first President Bush proclaimed to be “a new world order.” In 1992, the Pentagon unveiled its new military strategic plan, which bluntly asserted that the United States would not tolerate the emergence of a new challenger to its hegemonic position.

Since the 1960s, the global economic preeminence of the United States had been in decline. The world’s largest creditor nation had become, by the onset of the 1990s, its largest debtor. However, the United States still enjoyed overwhelming military superiority over all existing and potential rivals, and it was determined to use this advantage to secure its position as the dominant world power. The 1990s witnessed the escalating use of military force by the United States to achieve its global geopolitical goal. As Trotsky had foreseen in the 1930s, whereas Germany under Hitler sought *only* to organize Europe, the aim of American imperialism was to organize the world. He predicted that humanity would be compelled to confront the global eruption of US militarism. The events of the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have substantiated Trotsky’s farsightedness.

The United States launched its first war against Iraq in 1991. In 1992, it instigated the breakup of Yugoslavia, setting into motion the sectarian warfare that set the stage for the 1999 war against Serbia. The United States, under Clinton, also made its first substantial foray into Somalia, whose location on the Horn of Africa invests the impoverished country with immense strategic significance. Though the initial intervention ended in disaster, the Somalian operation was followed by an immense expansion of US operations in Africa, symbolized by the creation of AFRICOM, the strategic center of US military operations on the continent and in the Indian Ocean region.

However, the Middle East remained a central focus of US operations—not only because of the huge economic and strategic significance of oil, but also because it had come to be seen by the American strategists as the essential gateway to the American conquest of the greatest

geopolitical asset: the vast Eurasian landmass, stretching from Russia to the border of China. The dissolution of the USSR transformed the geopolitics of the region. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan became independent states. The Caucasus and Caspian Sea area were suddenly a major factor in the world oil market, as well as in the markets of other key natural resources. For the United States, the dissolution of the USSR provided an extraordinary opportunity to project its power into this vast region, especially under conditions in which Russia was still reeling from the devastating consequences of the Soviet breakup. In 1997, Zbigniew Brzezinski—the national security adviser during the Carter administration between 1977 and 1981—who played a major role in instigating and arming the Islamist insurgency against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan and thus initiated the chain of events that led to the creation of Al-Qaeda, the catastrophic events of 9/11 and the US invasion of the Central Asian country in 2001—wrote a provocative and influential book entitled *The Grand Chessboard*. In a key passage, Brzezinski argued:

For America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia. For half a millennium, world affairs were dominated by Eurasian powers and peoples who fought with one another for regional domination and reached out for global power. Now a non-Eurasian power is preeminent—and America’s global primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained...

In that context, how America ‘manages’ Eurasia is critical. Eurasia is the globe’s largest continent and is geopolitically axial. A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world’s 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, rendering the Western Hemisphere and Oceania geopolitically peripheral to the world’s central continent. About 75 percent of the world’s people live in Eurasia, and most of the world’s physical wealth is there as well, both in its enterprises and underneath its soil. Eurasia accounts for about 60 percent of the world’s GNP and about three-fourth of the world’s known energy resources...

Eurasia is thus the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played. [pp. 30-31]

Since Brzezinski’s book first appeared 16 years ago, the central role of Eurasia—or what the renowned early twentieth-century geo-strategist Sir Halford Mackinder called “the world island”—in the military strategy of the United States has become all but obvious. The United States has been at war in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan during the past decade. However, dominance in Eurasia cannot be secured until the United States has overcome the resistance of three major countries whose own interests in the region are even more direct than that of the United States—Iran, Russia and China. Of these three countries, the challenge posed by Iran is the most pressing. Its geographic position makes it a major factor in the power

relations of the Middle East and Central Asia. It dominates the Persian Gulf, through which passes the bulk of supertankers that transport the oil of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to the world. It shares borders with Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The CIA-sponsored coup of 1953 that overthrew the nationalist government of Mossadeq and reinstalled the hated Shah on the “Peacock Throne” ensured US control of Iran for a quarter century. The Shah Reza Pahlavi relied on the mechanisms of a brutal police state. Countless thousands of communists, workers and students were brutalized and murdered in the torture chambers of the Shah’s secret police, known as SAVAK. This state of affairs, backed by the United States, was overthrown by the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The destruction of this regime and the reestablishment of US control over Iran has been a central objective for more than 30 years. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration backed the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq’s eight-year war against Iran. In 1988, the United States encouraged and provided key intelligence for Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers.

The furor over Iran’s alleged plans to develop a nuclear weapon is bound up with the determination of the United States to destroy Iran’s capacity to thwart Washington’s ambitions in the Middle East and Central Asia. How this is to be ultimately achieved—through the instigation of civil war, a direct attack, or a combination of the two—is still not decided. However, the determination of the United States to overthrow the Syrian regime and replace it with a puppet government is inextricably linked to Washington’s struggle against Iran. Bashar Al-Assad must go, as far as the US is concerned, because his regime is a critical ally of Iran. The overthrow of the Assad regime would serve to isolate Iran, weaken its influence in the Middle East, and render it more vulnerable to attack.

The most critical constituency of the Syrian regime is the Alawite population, whose religion is an offshoot of Shiism. In Iran, the Shiites comprise the largest section of the population. This is why the United States, in its efforts to overthrow Assad, has been in a de facto operational alliance with Sunni-based Al Qaeda-related military forces. This fact has gone almost entirely unnoted in the US media.

The decade-long war against Syria

In the narrative of the media, the Obama administration has been a more or less passive bystander as the civil war in Syria unfolded. Except for the violation of its “Red Line,” the Obama administration had no desire to intervene in the conflict. The media simply ignores the fact that the United States has been escalating political, economic and military pressure against Damascus for more than a decade. In the State of the Union Address delivered by President George W. Bush in January 2002, Iran, Iraq and North Korea were described as the “Axis of

Evil.” In May 2002, Undersecretary of State John Bolton gave a speech entitled “Beyond the Axis of Evil” in which he expanded Bush’s list to include Cuba, Libya and Syria.

One year later, the Bush administration signed into law the “Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003,” which imposed significant sanctions against the Assad regime. The act passed with overwhelming bipartisan support following congressional hearings at which opponents of the bill were not permitted to testify. The aggressive implications of the bill were understood by experts in Middle Eastern politics. In an essay published in the Spring 2004 issue of the journal *Middle East Policy*, Professor Stephen Zunes of the University of San Francisco warned:

The Syrian Accountability Act could serve as a precursor to US military action against Syria. It spells out, in more detail than the administration ever did regarding Iraq, reasons for a US invasion. By declaring that, “Syria’s acquisition of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs threaten... the national security interests of the United States,” Congress would find it difficult to then deny any request by the president to authorize military action. [p. 66]

Do oil and natural gas have anything to do with the Syrian insurgency?

Nearly 15 years ago, on the eve of the US assault on Serbia, I exchanged correspondence with a noted historian at a major university, the author of a widely used text book on world politics in the twentieth century. His work had capably exposed the material interests that are concealed behind imperialists’ sugary phrases about human rights. However, this scholar was completely convinced that the bombing of Serbia by the United States was motivated by only the noblest of motives, untainted by unstated geopolitical, let alone economic, interests. He found it nothing less than absurd to suggest that war in the Balkans had anything whatsoever to do with America’s efforts to establish its dominance in the oil- and natural gas-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia! To believe that there existed a link between the military operations of the United States and oil interests was nothing less than an expression of crude economic determinism.

At the risk of rendering myself vulnerable to the charge of being a “vulgar Marxist”—that is, one who happens to believe that economic interests play a far greater role in shaping global geopolitics than the moral ideals that are hypocritically invoked by imperialist governments—permit me to call your attention to the appearance on July 25, 2013 of Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats.

Dr. Mankoff’s testimony explained the increasing global significance of oil and natural gas deposits that are located in the Eastern Mediterranean. He noted:

[T]he Levant Basin in the Eastern Mediterranean holds around 122 trillion cubic feet (or 3.45 trillion cubic meters) of undiscovered, technically recoverable natural gas, along with 1.7 billion barrels of crude oil. Most of the currently known deposits are off the coast of Israel, and in adjacent fields off Cyprus. Additional, still undiscovered fields may be located off the coasts of Lebanon and Syria. While the currently recognized volumes are small relative to those found in the Persian Gulf, Russia, or the Caspian Sea Basin, they are large enough to have a significant impact on the energy security of states in the Eastern Mediterranean, and make some, albeit more limited, contribution to energy security in Europe.

As always, the presence of substantial deposits of oil and natural gas intensify conflicts, both among the regional states and their financial elites that hope to profit from the riches that lie below the earth, as well as among the major powers that evaluate the implications of oil and gas deposits in terms of not only money, but also geopolitical advantage. Already, there are bitter disputes among the regional states over ownership rights and the means by which the oil and natural gas will be transported to global markets. To his credit, Dr. Mankoff, unlike the professor with whom I corresponded in 1999, recognizes that conflict over resources is certainly playing a major role in exacerbating tensions. He testified:

The oil and gas resources of the Eastern Mediterranean sit, however, at the heart of one of the most geopolitically complex regions of the world. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, tensions between Israel and Lebanon, the frozen conflict in Cyprus, and difficult relations among Turkey, the Republic of Cyprus and Greece all complicate efforts to develop and sell energy from the Eastern Mediterranean. The Syrian civil war has injected a new source of economic and geopolitical uncertainty, and standing in the background is Russia, which is seeking to enter the Eastern Mediterranean energy bonanza, and to maintain its position as the major supplier of oil and gas for European markets.

Elite opinion and mass opinion

By now, it should come as no surprise that the media has all but ignored the complex problems of geopolitics and economics that underlie the drive toward war. Except for occasional articles, usually in lesser known publications, the coverage of the crisis in the mass media consists almost entirely of propaganda. This very fact makes the popular opposition to war all the more significant. It has developed in opposition to the relentless pro-war propaganda of the media. During the past month, the broadcast media and newspapers have done their best, or should we say their worst, to whip the population into frenzy. One particularly notable feature of contemporary pro-war propaganda is the persistent calls for the killing of the leaders of countries that are being targeted for attack by the United States. This was the case with Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. They are all now dead.

Calls for the killing of Assad are now common in the media. The *Economist* declared in its issue of August 31-September 6 that Assad “should be shown as little mercy as he has shown to the people he claims to govern. If an American missile then hits Mr. Assad himself, so be it. He and his henchmen have only themselves to blame.” Bret Stephens of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote on August 27: “Should President Obama decide to order a military strike against Syria, his main order of business must be to kill Bashar Assad. Also, Bashar’s brother and principal henchman, Maher. Also, everyone else in the Assad family with a claim on political power.”

The redoubtable A. Barton Hinkle of the *Richmond Post Gazette* advised his readers on September 4, “The most obvious advantage of killing Assad is that it would do precisely what the president wants to do: send a message that certain crimes against humanity will meet with swift punishment.”

Among the first to urge the murder of Assad was the prominent “left” liberal columnist Peter Beinart. Writing in *The Daily Beast* more than one year ago, on June 11, 2012, Beinart said:

Let me propose an unpleasant thought experiment: Maybe America should try to kill Bashar al-Assad?...

In fact, it’s hard to discern any principle that distinguishes killing Assad from the targeted assassinations and humanitarian wars that command significant American political support...

But the larger question is how far we’re willing to go in prioritizing American security interests and humanitarian ideals over national sovereignty and international law. Given how far America has moved in that direction in recent years, trying to assassinate Bashar al-Assad doesn’t seem radical at all.

The people who write such lines are not simply degraded individuals. They are, if one proceeds on the basis of the principles established at the 1946 war crimes trials of Nazi leaders held in Nuremberg, criminals. They are guilty of war propaganda, which was declared an illegal activity by the Nuremberg tribunal. Since the basic principle established at Nuremberg was that the waging of an aggressive war—defined as a war that is launched not in response to a clear and imminent threat of attack, but, rather, for the purpose of achieving certain political or economic objectives—is a crime, it follows that those who incite war are themselves engaged in criminal activity. As explained by Professor John B. Whitton in a 1971 article that appeared in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* :

Hence, since a war of aggression is now declared illegal, propaganda as incitement of this offense also constitutes a violation of the law of nations.

The war crimes trials in Germany and Japan following World War II stand as a precedent, not only for the rule that aggressive war is a crime, but also for the norm against ideological aggression.

In his discussion of war propaganda as a crime, Whitton specifically refers to *defamatory propaganda*, which is a form of propaganda that seeks to incite war through the incitement of mass hatred against the leaders of “enemy” countries.

This is an important concept. It is one thing to expose and even denounce political leaders who may, in fact, be guilty of reprehensible acts. But calls for assassination have as their aim not only the dehumanization of an individual, but also, by extension, the citizens of the country he leads. Above all, such propaganda attempts to extinguish within the people of the aggressor country all critical faculties, to render them oblivious to all legal norms, and to lower their consciousness to the level of a lynch mob or, just about as bad, passive eyewitnesses to crimes against humanity.

It should also be pointed out that journalists have not restricted their approval of state killing to foreign leaders who have run afoul of the geopolitical interests of the American state. Last month, Michael Grunwald, a senior editor of *Time* magazine, fired off a twitter message that read: “I can’t wait to write a defense of the drone strike that takes out Julian Assange.”

Such a statement by a leading American journalist reveals all too clearly the essential link between the eruption of American imperialism and the unrestrained growth of fascistic tendencies within the ruling class and the political establishment that serves its interests.

Finally, how is one to account for the vast political chasm that has opened up between *official*, ferociously pro-war, public opinion and the *real* anti-war feeling that predominates among the mass of the population? The answer is to be found in the unbridgeable social chasm that separates the super-rich elite that rules the United States from the conditions, financial and social, that confront the broad mass of the population. The wealthiest five to one percent of the population—not to mention the richest 0.1 (one in a thousand) and 0.01 (one in ten thousand) percent—live in an entirely different social universe from that of the overwhelming majority of the country. The economists Piketty and Saez have just released a study that shows that 95 percent of all gains in household income since 2009, the official beginning of the so-called economic “recovery,” went into the pockets of the richest one percent of the population! Those on the top have lost all sense of reality. They simply are incapable of an empathetic awareness of the conditions and sentiments of the great mass of the population. That is why the Obama administration and the media so completely misjudged the mood of the American people.

The conmen and swindlers of the ruling elite and their political and media bagmen are losing their hold over the consciousness of the people. The anti-war sentiments of the working class, both within the United States and internationally, are an expression of an emerging anti-capitalist consciousness, which shall become ever more apparent and politically articulate.

The fight against imperialism, war, social inequality and political repression is inextricably bound up with the fight against capitalism. This is the perspective upon which the Socialist Equality Party, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and their co-thinkers in the International Committee are seeking to build a new anti-war movement.