

1The Fruits of US Foreign Policy

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Near the end of 2003 Colin Powell made a solemn visit to a mass grave of Kurdish victims of gassing by Saddam's regime in 1988. The Secretary of State's pilgrimage followed recent visits to the same site by Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Rumsfeld in now ritualized selective mourning directed toward turning the growing Iraq quagmire into a paean to human rights – detracting attention from daily casualties and staggering costs of an occupation which had failed to find weapons of mass destruction and has failed to bring measurable self-rule to the Iraqi people.

With all other rationales imploding, the claim that Iraq has finally been freed from the horrors of mass murder and repression by a benevolent intervention to install democracy has now become the primary argument for this costly, destructive venture. However, such claims were belied by a disturbing report on ABC around the same time as Powell's visit to the mass grave. In response to a reporter's question put to a "high US government official" about why Washington in the first gulf war encouraged the Shiites in southern Iraq to rebel, only to later facilitate the killing of tens of thousands of them by a vengeful Saddam, the official replied: "It's better to have [in power] the devil we know than the devil we don't know."

That chilling statement underscores that fact that "human rights," democracy and freedom from terror are invariably trumped by the larger strategic, political and economic interests that drive Washington's foreign policies – even at the price of committing or abetting mass murder. At a deeper level, human rights are ultimately subverted by nation states operating within a global social system motivated by objectives and interests which at their essence cannot and do not accommodate the needs "liberated" peoples but must exploit them and suppress their quest for self-determination.

Iraq has recently gone through a political process – adopting a constitution and electing a government. That process was actually mightily resisted from the start by the US provisional governing authority, in short, the occupiers who wished to fashion a series of caucuses appointed and controlled by the occupation itself. The ersatz "government" that would arise from this formula would then be a direct tool of Washington's strategic goal to establish permanent military bases in Iraq as levers to dominate the region, to control Iraq's oil, and to use that control to influence the political behavior of the European Union and oil hungry emerging Asian

economic powers like China and India. That original plan collapsed when the Ayatollah El-Sistani called tens of thousands of Shiites into the streets to demand “one person, one vote.” Today, a broad and diverse sector of Iraqi society that does not get headlines, struggles within a fragile political process to advance democracy, while recognizing that national sovereignty cannot be won under military occupation and knowing that the acid test for building a self-determining, democratic system is ascension to power by the Iraqi people over their country’s wealth and polity.

Indeed, Washington’s claims of democratic emergence in Iraq are negated by the often brutal and arbitrary behavior of occupation forces unhinged by resistance. There can be little doubt that Washington and its acolytes at this moment of vote counting are maneuvering to prevent the emergence of a popularly-elected government which would order the withdrawal of foreign military forces, the dismantling of bases that had been built for permanence, and the removal of US political leverage over the entire Middle East and its resources.

US opposition to popularly elected governments and popular movements seen as inimical to its strategic and economic interests is deeply rooted in the history of the nation’s foreign and military policies. Its actions in Iran, Guatemala, the Congo, Chile, Nicaragua, Cuba, The Philippines, and Vietnam are among the most visible examples of over 130 bloody armed interventions in the last century.

Less widely recognized than the record of open, preemptive war is the long history of imperial ambition cloaked in the raiment of advancing democracy, human rights and open markets. The US’s first major foray onto the world imperial stage was in the late nineteenth century when Washington, facing already consolidated European and Japanese spheres of influence in China, called for an “Open Door” to that promising market. The Open Door was cloaked in opposition to imperial spheres; it was “anti-colonial colonialism” pressed by a power late to the imperial game, but rapidly surpassing its competitors in economic and military strength. Such power, US ruling groups believed, would soon overwhelm the imperial spheres and establish US hegemony over all of China through open markets, free trade and demagogic embrace of the anti-imperialist longings of native populations. The US Open Door venture in Asia foundered in the face of European and Japanese resistance, while in the same period the Spanish-American war ended in a more direct and brutal US suppression of indigenous rebellion in the Philippines as well as in a half century of domination of Cuba through bogus regimes under thinly disguised US control.

Woodrow Wilson was the prime architect of a US empire in the name of “democracy, human rights and self-determination.” His vision of free elections and parliamentary rule was patterned

on the US model -- calculating that such institutions imposed on underdeveloped regions would discourage participation by the poor and assure rule by educated middle and upper classes who would serve as factotums for US business – protecting foreign property and investments while obliging their infrastructures to depend on US technology. Interventions in Haiti, Mexico and Central America under Wilson often embraced the rhetoric of human rights while constituting violent aggrandizement of big business interests. Wilson pressed the US into World War I not to prevent an imperial re-division of the world, nor to pursue universal self-determination, but to guarantee a place at the postwar bargaining table for pursuit of US strategic and economic objectives. Wilson sought to impose open markets globally – but settled for a share of “trusteeships” over the defeated central powers’ colonies when the other great powers rejected the dismantling of the colonial system. His losing battle to take the US into the League of Nations was based on a belief that US imperial interests could be best realized under an ordered international system. Wilson’s victorious senatorial opponents sought maximum freedom of action unencumbered by commitment to an international formation. They won – and this turned out to be the first clear expression of a split in ruling circles between “multilateralists” and “unilateralists.”

Unilateralism tended to predominate during the supposedly “isolationist” twenties with a vast expansion of US investments in underdeveloped countries and with repeated military interventions – especially in the Caribbean and Central America. Multilateral engagement did not clearly reemerge until FDR was confronted with the need to form a grand alliance against fascism – an alliance that laid the groundwork for the United Nations. However, the disintegration of that alliance into a bipolar cold war ushered in one of the most unsavory and painful chapters in US history. While Roosevelt had edged toward a vision of an Open Door world that defined human rights in terms of political freedom and the essential right to food, shelter, medical care and work -- the US in the cold war fomented the ascension of dictators, subversion of popular moments, bloody coups and major wars, all in the name of stopping communism.

Postwar parliamentary governments in Germany and Japan are often pointed to as successful examples of US “nation building” anchored on respect for human rights. But those countries were reconstructed after WWII on advanced industrial foundations that keyed strong recoveries. They were programmed as bulwarks against the spread of communism in Europe and Asia and as markets for an expansive postwar US economy. The Marshall Plan obligated recovering Europe to purchase US products and allow US capital to penetrate its economies. In West Germany the first parliamentary elections were rigged to give advantage to rural conservatives; the country’s industries and political structures were honeycombed with former Nazis, some of whom were quickly freed after conviction for war crimes; throughout the fifties the German

Communist Party was denied legal status. Japanese recovery was predicated on the imposition of a voracious capitalism and against considerable popular opposition to permanent US military bases.

The collapse of the USSR and the east bloc diminished the need for “authoritarian” anti-communist regimes that were staples of US cold war alliances. The price of sponsoring the likes of Pinochet in Chile, Fujimori in Peru, Somoza in Nicaragua, was no longer worth paying – especially when Washington, unencumbered by cold war competition, could revive the old Wilsonian vision of a mirror-image world of a stable “democratic” states open to corporate plunder buttressed by unchallenged US military power. It was no accident that Pentagon guru Paul Wolfowitz (now head of the World Bank) emerged in the early 1990s under Dick Cheney’s sponsorship to promote yoked concepts of preemptive attack on any who challenged US hegemony along with promotion of allegedly democratic regimes as alternatives to Jean Kirkpatrick’s outmoded alliances with authoritarians. The dissolution of the states of Eastern Europe erased the minimal multilateral arrangements for constraining the risk of nuclear war and reawakened, with qualitatively new ugliness and menace, the imperial unilateralism of former times.

In the wake of Vietnam, Jimmy Carter had emphasized human rights as a way to erase the stain of the war while also seeking to strengthen dissident movements in socialist states. After 1991, “human rights” was more clearly directed toward becoming an inseparable lever for corporate global integration. Yet, on the left, “humanitarian intervention” became a contentious issue. Bill Clinton’s use of military force to reinstall Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti (after he had been ousted in a military coup) and two US-NATO interventions in Yugoslavia to allegedly halt ethnic cleansing became major sources of confusion and division.

Aristide, a populist ex-priest and his Family Lavalas party had risen to power in Haitian politics while earning the enmity of the country’s small privileged elite. That elite, along with armed remnants of the Duvalier dictatorship overthrew the exponent of liberation theology in 1990. Bill Clinton’s return of Aristide to power in 1994 seemed to suggest even to some on the left that perhaps a new post-cold war epoch of US enlightenment was dawning. To put it mildly: that was not the case. As a price for returning, Aristide was forced to accommodate to Washington’s agenda: vowing to include elements of the right wing in his resurrected government to preserve stability, accepting the dictates of global financial institutions – including acceding to IMF demands for dismantling what little remained of the public sector, thus maximizing the profitability of Haiti’s free trade zones, assuring a compliant non-complaining flow of cheap labor controlled by security forces, and allowing the US Coast Guard to patrol Haitian waters. Under these circumstances Clinton’s “humanitarian” intervention had locked Haiti into its

grinding poverty with two out of three jobless, a per capita annual income of \$250, and 4.7 million out of 7.7 suffering from severe malnutrition. Yet, even that was not enough for US investors and their political allies. Eventually, Aristide (himself not fully innocent of violations of legality under nearly impossible circumstances) was forcibly removed from power, principally for seeking to sustain Haiti's meager social safety net and state-owned enterprises. At this moment a bogus Haitian election is being readied, marked by a deliberate policy to deny polling places in poorest areas which happen to be Aristide strongholds.

In 1980, Yugoslavia's debt to western institutions was twenty billion dollars. But due to cold war strategic considerations, it was not dealt with harshly. However, the collapse of the USSR changed all that: Washington's assistance ended; the crushing weight of the IMF now came down on Yugoslavia with demands for expedited debt payments and increased privatization. The country was gripped by severe crisis; its state sector was starved of capital while production and employment tumbled. Germany orchestrated the breakup of the prosperous northern states of Croatia and Slovenia, further aggravating a gathering catastrophe. With the economic vise tightening, a vicious war for spoils broke out between Croatia and Serbia, the two major ethnically-based states among the six forged into a national entity by Josef Tito in 1945. Slobodan Milosevic, the former communist Serb leader seized the dubious banners of Serb nationalism, allying with rightist military forces, while Franjo Tudjman, the Croatian president, engaged in similar tactics. The war was fought over the resources and strategic worth of ethnically-diverse Bosnia with both sides engaging in the killing or removal of ethnic groups perceived as enemies.

The United States, abetted by NATO, determined that a fragmented Yugoslavia reshaped into weaker client states would constitute the best road to the extension of US and NATO influence into the Balkans and to reducing the danger that two NATO members, Greece and Turkey, might intervene on opposing sides. Serbia, the fulcrum of a formerly coherent Yugoslavia, with perhaps the most deeply rooted remnants of socialism, became the principal target. Milosovic had attempted to accommodate the demands of the IMF and other creditors. But grass roots resistance and accelerating economic collapse made it too late. Serbia also drew the strongest spotlight on its practice ethnic violence while a weaker but no less culpable Croatia won a public relations battle. In 1994, the Clinton administration armed and trained a combined Croat-Muslim force to drive Serbs out of Croatian border areas with Bosnia, killing 10,000 and making 200,000 homeless in a human rights disaster. In August 1995, NATO at US urging launched a devastating bombing campaign against the Serbs. The Clinton administration cobbled together the Dayton Accords that effectively partitioned Bosnia and ultimately broke up Yugoslavia. Orthodox Serbs and Bosnian Muslims who had coexisted for many years, had intermarried and had shared the landscape, were now sundered and thrown into grating and virtually permanent poverty.

While this carnage was going on, the economy of Kosovo in the south was collapsing. Under growing economic and social pressures, a bitter struggle broke out between competing Albanian and Serb nationalisms. Like the Bosnia war, Washington imposed sanctions on Serbia, launched “humanitarian” bombing campaigns, and forced a short-term settlement that eventually came apart and obliged the UN to enter the picture. Today, the killing in Kosovo is no longer on the front pages – but it goes on with at least 1200 killed since a brokered truce took effect and with spreading social and economic misery.

The consequences of “humanitarian interventions” driven by the requirements of corporate globalization were summed up in a Boston Globe article (6/22/03): “In the postwar, post-Milosevic Serbia, the notion of ‘truth and reconciliation’ runs far behind pressing economic concerns. Life is hard, with rising prices matched by high unemployment and stagnant wages. Some state-run factories have closed, disemploying whole villages. And the real shocks of privatization lie ahead.”

It is not possible for present US global policies to pursue and accommodate any reasonable standards of democracy and human rights. Interventions in the core interests of corporate globalization and in defiance of international law ultimately worsen the living conditions and liberties of those whose rights are allegedly being upheld. That is the heart of the matter – and that is more and more being recognized and addressed the world over in the struggle for a better life for all.

Indeed, a gigantic worldwide movement is afoot today to fight neo-liberalism, the policy and practice of the major technological and financial powers to dictate unfair and destructive trade policies, to coerce small, developing countries to deny their own populations basic health care (while AIDS is literally destroying African nations) and social welfare to that they can service their debt, to degrade their own environments, to curtail production of agricultural commodities that compete with the powerful, to debase their currencies, and to suppress indigenous protest.

One of the most significant and potentially transforming developments at this historic moment is growing resistance in every corner of the world to neo-liberalism and its attendant disasters. Right now the World Social Forums of hundreds of thousands anti-corporate and antiwar activists are being held in Africa, Asia and in Venezuela in our own hemisphere. Indeed, Latin America has become the political flashpoint of resistance and experimentation in alternatives to the political and economic hegemony of the rich and powerful. Resistance advances in a variety of ways throughout the world – fighting the strangling demands of the IMF and the World Bank upon weak economies, building local cooperatives (tens of thousands have been developed in

Venezuela) aimed primarily at improving peoples' lives rather than generating profits for external powers, seeking to end militarism and eliminating preemptive war, taking control of indigenous resources for the betterment of society, etc. With such varied aims, center-left and left-center governments have come to power in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Chile. On the horizon is the ascension to power of progressive regimes in Mexico, Ecuador, Peru and Nicaragua. Who would have imagined a short time ago, that Washington would potentially be more politically and morally isolated in this hemisphere than Cuba?

Today, it is clearer than ever that genuine pursuit of human rights must embrace principles of ending imperial unilateralism and respecting the equality of nations; respecting the values, traditions, and beliefs of all countries and peoples; resolving conflicts through equal discussion and cooperation; redistributing wealth to close the gap between rich and poor; ending environmental degradation, and accepting the principle that the well being of humanity is the basic goal of human endeavor. That is a big order. But impressive global movements to fulfill those and similar objectives are already in motion. And, here in the citadel of empire, all who care about human rights and democracy should demand enlightened and effective policies toward those ends. Pursuit of those policies should be part of the present electoral process; they should be incorporated into the efforts of all who seek progress to build a polity that addresses human rights within the framework of economic justice and international cooperation. That can be done.

Thank you.