

## **Building A Movement Against Empire**

**By Phyllis Bennis | May 2003**

As the Bush administration strengthens its military victory and consolidates its occupation of Iraq, it continues its trajectory toward international expansion of power and global reach. The arrogance of its triumphalism, ignoring civilian carnage and dismissing the destruction of the ancient cities because, in Rumsfeld's words, "free people have the right to do bad things and commit crimes," reflects the hubris of ancient empires. Shakespeare's "insolence of office" could well describe the contempt with which the Pentagon warriors look down on the peoples of the world.

The U.S. war in Iraq is certainly not the first time the U.S. has unilaterally, illegally, and without justification attacked another country. But in the past—whether Grenada, Panama, the first Gulf War, 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 preemptive war, the 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 not pose any imminent threat, and that international authority was unnecessary.

Claiming the right of preemptive war would not, by itself, be proof of empire. Even launching a war more accurately defined as an aggressive preventive war (since a preemptive attack implies an imminent threat) does not by itself represent such proof. But the eagerness of Washington's powerful to launch this war, without United Nations authorization and with such reckless disregard for the consequences, with the expressed aim of toppling the government of an independent country, albeit one mortally wounded from war and twelve years of

murderous sanctions, may represent just such proof. Certainly one can argue, as Paul Schroeder does, that there is a critical distinction between hegemony and empire. (The History News Network, Center for History and the New Media, George Mason University, February 3, 2003.) "Hegemony," he writes, "means clear, acknowledged leadership and dominant influence by one unit within a community of units not under a single authority. A hegemon is first among equals; an imperial power rules over subordinates. A hegemonic power is the one without whom no final decision can be reached within a given system; its responsibility is essentially managerial, to see that a decision is reached. An imperial power rules the system, imposes its decision when it wishes."

Schroeder concludes that the U.S. "is not an empire—not yet." Writing some weeks before Washington's invasion of Iraq, he describes 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



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over the whole Middle East through exclusive paramouncy.”

The rapid overthrow of the Iraqi regime, with its attendant moments of exhilaration and long hours of horror for tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians, has pushed Bush administration officials over that brink. Their smug “other Middle Eastern governments better learn their lesson” attitude indicates a fortified sense of self-righteousness and the justification of their cause. If Washington has not yet consolidated its global empire, the drive toward it is now undeniable.

## An Imperial Moment?

Ultimately though, what is key is less the debate over whether the U.S. today is an aggressive hegemon or an imperial center bound for global domination, than understanding the political significance and consequence of this historical moment. U.S. tanks control the Euphrates valley and U.S. troops occupy the sites of the earliest records of humanity. But U.S. policy-makers willing to look beyond their own euphoria will see not only a devastated and dishonored Iraq facing at best an uncertain and difficult future; not only an Iraqi population whose largest components are calling equally for “No to Saddam Hussein” and “No to the U.S.” in their street protests; but also a humiliated and enraged Arab world; a shattered system of alliances; and a growing constellation of international opposition that includes Washington’s

closest allies and an emerging global people’s movement saying no to Washington’s war, and no to Washington’s empire.

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 industry administration, the actions of an irresponsible hegemony 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 even longer-standing and more visionary efforts to reshape regional and global power relations, the Iraq war emerges far more as exemplar of a broad and entrenched pattern, than as an isolated proof of U.S. intent.

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That is particularly significant in light of the combination of military, political, and economic factors whose collective expansion undergirds the relentless drive for power and empire. Militarily, the creation of a network of permanent bases throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, the Pentagon’s technolethal “revolution in military affairs,” the scaffolding of Israel’s rise as an unchallengeable regional military power, and most especially the public commitment to a

new generation of nuclear weapons designed for actual battlefield use, have contributed to a military capacity so enormous that no combination of other countries could even hope to approach, let alone match or surpass it.

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Elsewhere in the world, U.S. military involvement is on the rise in Latin America, particularly in Colombia, despite some emerging gains for popular forces on the continent. 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 the now-contentious Article VI of Japan's constitution, which prohibits the use of military force other than in self-defense. Washington is goading an unstable North Korea into consistently higher levels of nuclear brinkmanship, 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-neocolonial politics—in places such as Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Philippines.

The Bush administration's September 2002 *National Security Strategy* refers directly to maintaining the enormous military chasm between the military capacity of the U.S. and that of 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 view that every political challenge has a military answer. And earlier, abandoning the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and essentially consigning the Non-Proliferation Treaty to the dustbin of history were part of the 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 administration. The Bush

team continues its enthusiasm for domestic tax breaks for the rich and lack of concern with the dire domestic economic consequences of their \$100-200 billion war in Iraq. The post-war contract-grab and war profiteering for administration-linked companies in Iraq reflects the broader privatization focus of Bush foreign policy. Abroad, the United States continues its agenda of advancing corporate trade and investment rights, as it attempts to craft a new round of global trade talks in the World Trade Organization. Over the past six months Washington has blatantly tried to use economic aid and trade agreements as carrots and sticks to bribe, threaten, and purchase coalition partners for the war in Iraq. (Although it was in this area, particularly the refusal of the "Uncommitted Six" in the UN Security Council to sign on to Bush's "coalition of the willing," that Washington's failure was most visible.) And, the continuing moves to tighten U.S. control over strategic oil and gas reserves in the Middle East and Central Asia are aimed at providing more economic clout to Washington vis-à-vis its economic competitors and allies.

Politically and diplomatically, Washington's effort to undermine and render "irrelevant" the United Nations in the run-up to the Iraq war, clearly demonstrated the view of key Bush administration ideologues that UN authorization was not only unnecessary but actually damaging to the 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 administration's grudging and dismissive use of the UN went far beyond the Clinton administration's cynically instrumentalist view of the UN as what Madeleine Albright famously called "a tool of American foreign policy." The Bush White House dismissed any notion of accountability to

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international law or the UN Charter, operating instead on a litany of assertions that UN resolutions meant whatever 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 as long as we like.

As George Monbiot recently wrote, “the U.S., in other words, seems 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.” (*Guardian* - February 25, 2003)

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

There is no country or group of countries capable of launching a 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 joined by key governments as well as the United Nations itself. Not only the Non-Aligned stalwarts of South Africa, Cuba, Malaysia, 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 but clear about the danger of an unrestrained rogue empire. Not only the UN secretariat, 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 in defense of the UN Charter. But together all of those forces make up the astonishing movement toward a new internationalism that today forms the global challenge to the empire. And the United Nations, while not the only sector, is at its center.

## **The UN at the Center**

We are living through an extraordinary historical moment. The combination of events in mid-February—the unprecedented Security Council response to Villepin's call to defend the UN as an instrument of peace and not a tool for war and the resulting refusal of the Council and its members to accede to U.S. demands, and the outpouring of millions across the globe on February 15 when “The World Says No to War,” and the amazing reaction to those demonstrations by the U.S., UK, and other governments—provided even clearer evidence that we are at a critical historical juncture. The *New York Times* analysis defined this as a moment proving that once again there are two superpowers in the world—“the United States, and global public opinion.”

Although that global movement against war in Iraq failed to stop the U.S. onslaught, it is in the process of transformation into a movement against the emerging U.S. empire. Many of the speakers at many of the simultaneous February 15th rallies around the world hit the same point—this war, and this anti-war movement, are no longer just about Iraq. This is about mobilizing the world against Washington. To the shock of ideologically driven American analysts, European and other governments recognized that the need to constrain the U.S. is as urgent—or more so—as the need to restrain Baghdad—and that effort was reflected in

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the UN debate. Writing in the *New York Times* magazine, James Traub quoted an unnamed UN official saying that the Security Council “members ended up feeling that they had to stand up to American unilateralism.”

It was in this context that the conscious struggle—again with the UN as the primary venue—emerged among Europeans. “Old Europe” recognized the danger of ignoring the rise of U.S. power, and sought to go public with the long-denied goal of building Europe as an explicit counterweight to America. Public opinion in France, Germany, and elsewhere made it possible—indeed virtually mandatory—for those governments to stand defiant against the U.S. in the Security Council, making what likely began as a tactical disagreement with Washington into a point of principle. The “new”

European governments, still caught up in the illusion 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 United Nations debates.

The events of February 15 transformed a widespread antiwar sentiment into a powerful global movement, one that was mobilized around the world on the same slogan—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). It was that connection and coordination that set in motion Washington’s and other international ruling class’ recognition of the importance of our movement, at a moment when elite opposition had been largely squelched within U.S. domestic politics.

For the moment the main focus must remain on Iraq—because even the millions of people in the streets around the world couldn’t reverse Bush’s military course, and with Iraq laid to ruin the work of our antiwar movement isn’t done yet. But what’s clear is that a quickly increasing number of people within that movement understand it as part of a much bigger, global mobilization against a much bigger threat even than devastating war in Iraq.

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The arguments shaping that movement are only now being woven into a coherent whole. They start with condemning the civilian lives lost and massive destruction in Iraq, warning of regional instability throughout the Middle East and the possibility of increased terrorism world-wide as a result of the war, exposing the increased economic costs of the war and their impact on the poorest strata in the U.S. and elsewhere, including the virtual abandonment of already insufficient economic aid to Africa. Even before the war began, the movement was developing clarity on issues of U.S. hypocrisy regarding its own role in Iraq’s WMD programs, double standards regarding UN resolutions, and

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the massive Iraq resource-grab inherent in the hand-out of multi-billion dollar contracts to Bush administration corporate minions and cronies.

As the movement's parameters expand, the broader articulation frames the Bush administration's global trajectory and explains the connections within it. Those include the links between Iraq and Israel-Palestine; between oil, Central Asia, and the unfinished Afghanistan war; between preemptive war doctrine and aggressive preventive wars; between North Korean nukes and Israel's nuclear arsenal; between Syria, Iran, and weapons of mass destruction; between corporate domination and military spending; between U.S. power projection and local budgets; and between building a new internationalist movement and the role of the United Nations.

The issue of the UN role in the Iraq crisis alone is widely misunderstood and confusing for many people. The question of whether the UN, dominated by the U.S., is primarily a villain or a victim in situations like that surrounding the Iraq war, remains unresolved among many parts of the activist movement. Should the global organization be defended from U.S. attack, or targeted as "imperialism with a global face"? Recognition of the UN's potential as a center of opposition to U.S. hegemonic moves, while understanding the constraints imposed on the organization and the need for civil society to defend it from the ravages of U.S. power, is not wide-spread. The organizations created to defend the UN have served largely as cheerleaders, afraid

or unable to articulate the political context of the current anti-UN crusade. And many within the broader peace movement remained confused, seeing the UN's silences in the face of the U.S. war build-up as evidence of collaboration with the war. In the fall 2002/winter 2003 period, the refusal of the six Non-Aligned Security Council members to cave in to Washington's extraordinary pressure to endorse the U.S. war was amazing. But it remains insufficiently appreciated in many quarters.

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U.S. pressure on the UN continues. Along with other coercion, the threatening letters sent to most UN member states in February 2003 demanding that they refuse to consider a General Assembly debate on Iraq, seem to have worked. An international team of activists continues its campaign to urge the General Assembly to take up the issue, challenging Security Council primacy, pushing for a UN condemnation of the war and empowered UN leadership in the political and humanitarian reconstruction of Iraq.

In examining the composition of the emerging movement against empire, it is notable that in key countries where governments stood defiant of the U.S. war—including France, Germany, Brazil, the Philippines, and many other countries—the peace movements are made up of largely the same forces as the anti-corporate globalization or global justice movements. Their demands for a more equitable, just, and sustainable global order, even while pressing the need for peace, provide a key framework for global mobilization. And the nuanced political

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framework required to recognize the role Paris or Berlin play as part of the global front against U.S. empire, while rigorously challenging their corporate-driven economic trajectory as well as other domestic and foreign policies, is beginning to take shape.

We are engaged now in building a global movement for peace and justice in a new kind of world—and we need a new global strategy. It will take some time for a unifying agenda for the “global peace and justice movement” to emerge. One feature will have to include universal disarmament, focusing first on the largest nuclear/military powers, including America. Another will be the focus on economic justice as a linchpin of social mobilization. Other issues should include the primacy of internationalism and the centrality of the United Nations in all our work. That means claiming the UN as our own, as part of the global mobilization for peace, and working to empower the UN as the legitimate replacement for the United States empire we seek to disempower. Even now, in Iraq, we must emphasize the need for the UN, not the Pentagon, to take charge of not only the humanitarian crisis but the move to create a new government.

Our movement is broader and more complex than ever, being made up both of states and governments, and regional and international organizations including the United Nations, and the growing popular antiwar/global justice movements. That breadth provides both the promise of new power and influence, as well as extraordinary complexity and the need for strategic creativity involving careful combinations of “inside-outside” approaches to governments and multilateral organizations. Transnational Institute (TNI), with ties to key activists and organizations central to the broad people’s movements, as well as links to key governments and inter-governmental organizations, is one

of the few international centers positioned to play a vital role (in the original, not the Bush-Blair meaning) in building the global movement against empire in this new period.

Responding to the more-or-less spontaneous emergence of this global movement means helping provide a space for strategic planning among key actors in the key countries, and helping to shape a political/intellectual framework on which a worldwide peace and justice movement can transform itself into a politically conscious movement challenging empire while building a new internationalism.

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*(Phyllis Bennis <pbennis@compuserve.com> is a Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies and writes regularly for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)). This was prepared for the Transnational Institute’s Fellows’ Meeting, held May 16 – 17, 2003 (online at [www.tni.org](http://www.tni.org)) and is reprinted with permission.)*

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