

## The *new* imperialism? On continuity and change in US foreign policy

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Jim Glassman

Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 217–1984 West Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada; e-mail: [glassman@geog.ubc.ca](mailto:glassman@geog.ubc.ca)

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**Abstract.** The unilateral militarism of the George W Bush administration has rekindled interest in imperialism within geography and elsewhere in the social sciences, leading some authors to refer to a *new* imperialism, or *neo*-imperialism. This paper critically interrogates the notion that the foreign policy of this administration represents a significant break from past US practices, with the use of concepts from Gramsci and Poulantzas to analyze the class and class-fractional bases of US foreign policy both during and after the Cold War. It is argued that there are certain important continuities in contemporary US imperialism and that there are also differences that owe to the present, post-Cold-War context. It is suggested that if this analysis of continuities is correct then the problems and dangers posed by the “new imperialism” may not be as readily resolvable within a capitalist framework as is suggested by various contemporary commentators.

### Introduction

If the belligerent, unilateral militarism of the George W Bush (hereafter Bush II) administration has accomplished nothing else, it has unquestionably rescued the term ‘imperialism’ from the oblivion to which it seemed to be heading in most academic discourse at the end of the Cold War. From being a topic of merely historical interest in a putatively ‘postimperial’ world of ‘globalization’ and decentered ‘empire’ (Becker et al, 1987; Hardt and Negri, 2000), imperialism has suddenly been rediscovered as a topic of contemporary significance within geography (for example, Agnew, 2003; Gregory, 2004; Harvey, 2003; Smith, 2003; Sparke, 2003) and within the social sciences more generally. It is true that many social scientists and political commentators who have written about imperialism in the present tense have been long-standing critics of what they see as ongoing US imperialism (for example, Chomsky, 2003; Wallerstein, 2003). But some of the recent literature also asserts a transformation in the conduct of US foreign policy by the Bush II administration and thus claims to see a *new*, or *neo*-, imperialism in action. This is a view shared by various authors, both Marxist (for example, Harvey, 2003; Rupert, 2003) and non-Marxist (for example, Johnson, 2004; Mann, 2003).

I want to critically interrogate the notion that the foreign policy of the Bush II administration represents a significant break from past US practices. In doing so, however, I do not assert that *nothing* is different about the present practice of US imperialism, nor do I assert that current policies are nothing more than the continuation of past policies. Instead, I attempt to outline and analyze the class and class-fractional bases of US foreign policy both during and after the Cold War, and in doing so suggest continuities that are sometimes missed in assertions of a new imperialism while explaining differences in the present, post-Cold-War context that make Bush II foreign policy *appear* to some observers as a radical departure. My perspective in this interrogation is influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s insights regarding the blocs formed by classes and class-fractions and by Nicos Poulantzas’s insights regarding the relationship of states to the social division of labor. This kind of analysis both cuts

across and supplies connective tissue to discussions of the roots of US policies in economic interests (for example, oil profits and prices), geopolitical concerns (for example, military base rights), and cultural–ideological projects (for example, assertions of civilizational superiority).<sup>(1)</sup>

I conduct the analysis in two parts. In the first part of the paper, I present a broadly Gramscian paradigm for understanding the neoconservative political bloc in the United States, a bloc that all analysts agree is at the center of Bush II administration imperial practice.<sup>(2)</sup> Though the paradigm I outline was originally developed primarily for understanding US politics during the 1930s and the subsequent Cold War period, I argue that it has continued salience for understanding the relationship of the Bush II regime both to domestic and to international political forces. At the same time, I note how the post-Cold-War context in which Bush II came to power leads to somewhat different forms of political jockeying between competing blocs than those which occurred during the height of the Cold War. In the second part of the paper I elaborate possible practical implications of this Gramscian analysis. In particular, I suggest that if the analysis is correct then the problems and dangers posed by the ‘new imperialism’ may not be as readily resolvable within a capitalist framework as is suggested by various contemporary commentators.

## **US political blocs in the Cold War and after**

### **Material interests and US post-Cold-War foreign policy**

At the outset, I want to note the basic terrain of agreement shared by the critiques of contemporary US imperialism with which I am concerned, including my own analysis. First, all such critiques are agreed that the departures of the Bush II administration are dangerous and in need of serious opposition. Second, all the approaches to US imperialism I refer to here claim that the Bush II administration represents, at least in part, the rise to dominance of a political coalition led by *neoconservatives*, a group analytically and politically distinguishable from *neoliberals* and whose dominance clearly gives the Bush II regime much of its persona. Though agreeing generally with this contention, I will also suggest, however, that many analyses of the differences between neoconservative and neoliberal elites undertheorize these differences while simultaneously failing to analyze the relationships between neoliberals and neoconservatives within the broad tapestry of US imperialism. In the discussion which follows, therefore, I will try to specify both what neoconservatism and neoliberalism are as social phenomena, and how they relate to one another. Furthermore, I will cast these two ideal types as reflecting the contemporary evolution of sometimes competing but always interrelated political blocs, based in US capitalist class fractions that have an existence dating back at least prior to World War 2.

In employing these ideal types, I want to avoid both the error of reification—that is, regarding neoconservatism and neoliberalism as having lives of their own and as attracting adherents independently of the context-specific social genesis of the ideas with which the labels are identified—and the error of reductionism—that is, identifying the labels as nothing more than thin rationalizations of the projects of narrow social groups. Both neoconservatism and neoliberalism can be seen as being anchored crucially in very specific material interests but also as taking on broad political

<sup>(1)</sup> For a development of theoretical arguments underpinning the sort of Gramscian framework I employ here, see Glassman (2004). See also Gramsci (1971; 1995).

<sup>(2)</sup> Depending upon which aspect of the phenomenon of bloc formation he wishes to emphasize, Gramsci refers variously to blocs built within ideological fields (1971, pages 60–61, 72, 105) and political fields (1971, pages 74, 94–96, 157–158), in addition to ‘social blocs’ (1971, pages 202–205). I simplify here, in accordance with the focus of this paper, by referring merely to ‘political blocs’.

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significance insofar as they manifest the formation of blocs that bring together various supporters beyond those whose material interests are most immediately and obviously served by the projects in question. Moreover, though deploying a class-based analysis of neoconservatism and neoliberalism, I want to avoid the reification either of motives or of social processes that occurs when discussions turn to whether or not particular projects are driven fundamentally by economics, politics, culture, ideology, or other social forces. Class, as I conceive it here, refers to the relationship between a particular social group and the processes by which surplus value is appropriated from human labor. However, the fact that such a surplus is regarded as an economic phenomenon does not make classes (or class analysis) merely economic because classes are always constructed simultaneously as economic, political, social, cultural, and ideological entities (Thompson, 1978)—and are gendered and racialized in geographically and historically specific ways (Gibson-Graham et al, 2000; 2001).

With this in mind, I identify neoliberalism as a project underpinned by the interests of highly internationalized and relatively cosmopolitan capitalist elites (see Sklair, 2001), centered especially in industries such as banking and finance, whose representatives had begun by the 1970s to systematically invoke idealized conceptions of 18th-century and 19th-century market liberalism in a justification of their attempts to selectively free (especially financial) capital from certain state regulations (Harvey, 1989; Toye, 1987). Although neoliberalism has been presented in this context as ‘antistatist’ and in favor of ‘deregulation’, such characterizations involve a highly selective ideological reading of the ‘actually existing’ neoliberal agenda, which has involved both ‘rolling back’ the state in certain areas (for example, the regulation of currency transactions or industrial activities) and ‘rolling out’ the state in others (for example, state subsidies to specific industries and new regulations on ‘intellectual property’) (Harvey, 2003, pages 147–148; Peck and Tickell, 2002). As such, actually existing neoliberalism is best seen as involving a ‘reregulation’ of the global economy (McMichael, 1996), and as a politics of scale that attempts to place certain activities of transnational corporations (TNCs) either beneath or beyond the reach of national polities (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Swyngedouw, 1997).

Although neoliberalism is in this sense representative of projects directly connected to the interests of TNCs, it should not be seen as *merely* reflective of those interests. Indeed, from the 1970s to the present, neoliberalism achieved a now-challenged hegemony (in the Gramscian sense of leadership) precisely by being able to frame an agenda that claimed to speak for more than just the interests of capitalists. Neoclassically trained economists have played a major role in this framing by arguing for the broad social benefits of idealized ‘free markets’ and ‘free trade’ (Biersteker, 1995), and neoliberal political leaders have capitalized on popular discontent with corporatist welfare state policies in order to portray privatization and state rollback campaigns as new opportunities for popular participation through ‘decentralization.’ This agenda has not been merely ideological or rhetorical by any means: a major tactic of neoliberals has been to deliver tax cuts that have an obvious appeal to many people in intermediate social strata, then to downsize state bureaucracies that are unwanted by neoliberals in the name of a fiscal austerity made requisite by the budgetary constraints that result from the tax cuts. As such, neoliberals have often gained popular acquiescence or even active support from a substantial segment of society in their attempts to curtail welfare state spending—even when this comes around to exact a significant price from marginalized social groups later on. In this sense, neoliberals have in fact been able to *lead* throughout much of the world from the 1970s onward—forming, in Gramsci’s terminology, a historic bloc—rather than *merely* having to coerce populations into submission. At the same time, however, the neoliberal agenda is smitten with internal contradictions,

and neoliberal advertisements of prosperity through tax cuts and downsizing of social welfare provision have not matched the realities experienced by many people under post-Fordism, even by those members of the intermediate social groups who are most favorably disposed towards tax cuts. This has led to various challenges to neoliberal hegemony—challenges which, as I will note later, are relevant to understanding the rise of a neoconservative bloc in the United States.

Neoliberalism has sometimes been analyzed as a narrower phenomenon than I suggest here, being identified especially with economic doctrines such as those put forward by Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman long before the 1970s. Yet my contention in describing neoliberalism as a broad social phenomenon with roots in the interests of TNC owners is that whatever merits or demerits may be seen in the writings of such economists, we would pay little attention to them today had broad social changes not occurred that brought such intellectual constructs into popular use in connection with a variety of social, political, and economic activities.

For precisely the same reason, I choose here to describe neoconservatism as a broad social phenomenon. In a narrow and precise sense, neoconservatism refers to the views of a small group of policy intellectuals, formerly (during the Cold War), members of the Democratic Party, who by the Reagan years switched allegiance to the Republican Party (Chomsky, 2003, page 109; Sanders, 1983) and who have become important figures in the Bush II administration (Christison, 2004; Johnson, 2004, pages 70–71; Rupert, 2003). Leading neoconservative figures include former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, former chairman of the Defense Policy Board Richard Perle, and various former Reagan administration officials such as Elliott Abrams. Yet, just as neoliberalism came to be animated through its association with the projects of internationalist bankers and investors, neoconservatism has come to be animated by its association with policymakers that former CIA analyst Bill Christison (2004) refers to as “just plain conservatives”, including Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice—and, crucially, the various defense, energy, and construction firms with which these figures are connected (Harvey, 2003, page 192; Johnson, 2004, pages 144–146, 173, 228, 308–309; Mann, 2003, page 207).

Neoconservatism, as David Harvey correctly notes, is in some cases at odds with neoliberalism, but the relationship between the two is complex and there is some overlap both in ideals and in constituencies (Harvey, 2003, pages 190–202; Johnson, 2004, pages 255–281). Neoconservatives have typically spoken adamantly in favor of the neoliberal agenda of ‘deregulation’ and corporate globalization, yet they have also been more likely than the neoliberals to openly flaunt neoliberal principles in matters of tariff barriers protecting threatened ‘national’ industries, such as the US steel industry (Mann, 2003, page 59), and in matters of state expenditures deemed vital to the ‘national interest’, such as those for military industries (Johnson, 2004, pages 55–56, 277–281). Indeed, neoconservatives have gained a significant base of popular support by combining neoliberal rhetoric in favor of “getting government off peoples’ backs” with specific protectionist promises to labor and other social groups that have faced downward mobility as the result of restructuring and neoliberal globalization (Harvey, 2003, page 201; compare Rupert, 2000). As such, neoconservatives present a strange and seemingly contradictory amalgam of rhetorical support for neoliberal trade regimes and reduced taxes along with support for increased state protection for specific industries and increased spending on the state repressive apparatus. I will suggest here, though, that this amalgam is not in fact as strange as it sometimes appears, though it *does* manifest a significant tension within capitalism writ large, including its neoliberal wing.

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Neoliberalism and neoconservatism, though representing distinctive class-fractional interests, are by no means wholly antagonistic to one another. Indeed, it is symptomatic that *both* neoliberalism and neoconservatism are typically seen as having been given a significant institutional boost by the rise of the Reagan administration in 1981. The key to understanding this relationship, I contend, is to see it in terms of a central contradiction within the process of capital accumulation itself. At the general level, this contradiction is one between capitalists' need for an openness that allows new opportunities for investment (including geographical expansion to claim new markets, by force if necessary) and their need for a repressive state apparatus that closes down certain opportunities both for expropriation of capitalist property by working classes and for encroachment by competitors (including militarized interventions to close down activities by foreign competitors).<sup>(3)</sup> Though the ideal typology here can quickly become problematic, it is not off the mark at the outset to identify the need for market-opening expansion, with projects such as those of the international financial elite, in the era of neoliberalism; nor is it off the mark to identify the need, among the neoconservatives, for a strong repressive state apparatus to protect property and challenge competitors with projects such as those of the military–industrial elites.

The crucial point to note, in this regard, is that, although the kinds of capitalist interests that underpin neoliberalism and neoconservatism are sometimes at odds because of their specific demands on the state, they are also symbiotic. On the one hand, neoliberal investors, though requiring open global markets, also need a state repressive apparatus to enforce that openness and to protect their investments against expropriation, particularly by polities antagonistic to privatization and other aspects of neoliberal restructuring. Thus, neoliberal restructuring has regularly marched arm-in-arm—particularly in the Global South—with militarization or the maintenance of a strong police state (witness Chile under Pinochet, Peru under Fujimori, or Thailand during most of the period after World War 2). On the other hand, neoconservative military–industrial elites both require global market opportunities to enhance their own economic prospects and require a profitable flow of the kind of private investment that their activities are constructed in part to defend. In particular, robust overall economic growth—which in a capitalist context can be sustained only by a successful private-investment regime—is required to generate the tax base necessary for maintenance of a large military (compare Gramsci, 1995, pages 246–247). It is, therefore, precisely because groups of capitalists collectively need actions which 'open' markets in particular contexts and which 'close off' certain forms of class struggle and competition in others that class-fractional tensions can potentially come to the fore. And it is because these tensions are endemic to capitalist social structures that such tensions can be seen as reflecting systemic contradictions (compare Harvey, 2003, pages 89–90).

This general contradiction of capitalism, however, has a more specific manifestation in the development of 20th-century US capitalism. I turn now to an account of this contradiction that was developed by political economists writing in the 1980s and 1990s. Although the paradigm they framed was developed specifically to make sense of US domestic politics in the 1930s and, by extension, foreign-policy debates during the early period of the Cold War, I argue that it provides a useful basis for analyzing the rise of both neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the post-Cold-War era. Moreover, although this paradigm was not explicitly Gramscian, I present it in an overtly

<sup>(3)</sup> Here, I should emphasize that, although Gramsci's work places much emphasis on the development of consent as a basis for capitalist rule, he by no means overlooks the importance of coercion as an ongoing element of capitalist class power, even within the context of hegemony (for example, Gramsci, 1971, page 207). Moreover, as Poulantzas rightly notes, consent and coercion do not exist in a zero-sum relationship (1978, pages 78–81).

Gramscian form, emphasizing the class and class-fractional basis of the political struggles underpinning US foreign policy.

#### **US liberal internationalism and its conservative other in the Cold War era**

In 1984 political scientist Thomas Ferguson presented a detailed analysis of political party realignment in the United States during the era of the New Deal (Ferguson, 1984; see also Ferguson, 1995). His objective was to explain the development of the coalition that came to power under Franklin D Roosevelt and which successfully pushed forward various measures associated with the New Deal, measures which ultimately included the Wagner Labor Relations Act of 1935. Though Ferguson's focus was thus on domestic politics, the political blocs that he identifies in his analysis are also central actors in subsequent US foreign-policy ventures, so outlining these blocs is useful for understanding the development of complementary – competing foreign-policy groupings.

Ferguson constructs a four-square schema through the distinction between, first, more and less internationalist capitalists and, second, capitalists running more and less capital-intensive operations. The polar ideal types that emerge from this analysis are, first, owners of highly internationalized and capital-intensive firms and, second, owners of highly domestic-market-oriented and labor-intensive firms. The first types of capitalists, best represented by bankers and financiers, were willing to tolerate a new deal for labor (in part because of the low ratio of wages to value added in their operations) and, given their international mobility and interests, they also favored a foreign policy that would open international markets to US investment. Ferguson and others refer to this grouping as 'liberal internationalist', and an abundant literature explains how this liberal internationalist bloc became both a core constituency within the Democratic Party's foreign-policy branch (for example, Kolko, 1968; Kolko and Kolko, 1971; Shoup and Minter, 1977; Smith, 2003; Williams, 1988) and a decisive player in maintaining what has been called the 'labor accord'—namely, the deal with organized labor (emblemized by the Wagner Act) that pulled substantial labor support behind the Democratic Party (for example, Bowles et al, 1983; Rupert, 1995). The latter types of capitalists, who can be referred to (antithetically) as 'conservative nationalists', are best represented by a variety of smaller, domestic-market-oriented manufacturers and merchants. This grouping of capitalists, which was vehemently opposed both to labor unions and also (in some quarters) to what it conceived to be costly foreign-policy adventures, became a central constituency within the Republican Party.

These ideal-type political blocs were, of course, neither all-encompassing nor entirely stable over time and much of the actual process of political struggle between them from the 1930s to the 1960s involved give-and-take between different actors within the blocs, and opportunistic realignment by particular individuals and groups. This was the case with the conservative nationalists during the 1940s, for example, when many who had stated 'isolationist' foreign-policy preferences immediately after World War 2 shifted gears and joined the Cold War anticommunist crusade, once this could both be framed in compelling ideological terms and be presented as a tangible economic boon to specific military-linked industries (Kolko, 1968; Kolko and Kolko, 1971; Smith, 2003; Williams, 1988).

Mindful of these complexities, Bruce Cumings (1990) develops a framework of analysis similar to Ferguson's in his history of the Korean War. Focusing on foreign policy debates within the US political establishment during the period 1949–51, Cumings outlines a series of ideal-type groupings which are identified with specific foreign-policy approaches. Essentially, these groupings can be reduced to two, each with an associated 'extreme' policy position: the first, indirect undermining of Soviet power through capitalist expansion, or internationalism; the second, direct military

challenge to the Soviets, or rollback. A third position, containment, essentially represented the middle-ground, compromise position that frequently held sway throughout the decades-long tug-of-war between the groups favoring internationalism and rollback.

Cumings's ideal typologies of internationalism and rollback are worth citing in some detail. He outlines the major features of internationalism as follows (1990, pages 26–27).

*“Metaphor:* The open door.

*Economic Content:* Nonterritorial imperialism, a regulated open door, a world economy made safe for free trade, an absence of obstacles (ie, protectionism) ... a bloc of high-tech, competitive industries as the engine of expansion.

*Political Content:* A world under regulated law (the United Nations) ... practical US dominance assured through proxy-voting allies and clients in the UN and elsewhere.

*Strategic Content:* The United States looks after the whole, the allies the parts; joint world policing ... high-technology and maneuverable Navy, Air Force, and atomic capabilities more important than exclusive control of territories and military bases.

*Ideological Content:* ... classic Wilsonian idealism, masquerading as universalism; human rights and democratization; free trade as the (regulated) hidden hand that would bring progress everywhere and liberalize both transnational intercourse and domestic political and social structures.

*Role of the State:* The executive predominates within the state, at the expense of vested interests in the State Department and the military branches ... liberalization of target authoritarian states abroad.

*Social Constituency:* Eastern bankers, high-technology industries that can compete in the world market, pro-British ethnic groups and regions, liberal Democrats, Navy and Air Force (depending on budgets), intellectuals.”

This contrasts with Cumings's characterization of rollback (1990, pages 30–31):

*“Metaphor:* Positive action.

*Economic Content:* Classic, not Wilsonian, imperialism, territorial instead of non-territorial, resting on expansion by agglomeration and direct controls rather than indirect, economic levers; exclusive grasp of raw materials and markets (because of inability to compete in world markets); opposition to competition from revived Japan and Germany.

*Political Content:* Opposition to the UN and collective security ... anticommunism by whatever means necessary means support for reaction everywhere ...

*Strategic Content:* Asia-first, not Europe-first; away from old-world, immoral diplomacy; towards new-world, moral imperialism; exclusive control of territories and bases as means and not ends; hatred of taxes and communists leads to fascination with cheap, high-technology weaponry for obliterating the enemy, thus desire to use the atomic bomb and the Air Force, or another panacea like ‘Star Wars’; allies dominated and if recalcitrant, abandoned for fortress America.

*Ideological Content:* Rampant American nationalism, chauvinism with high (if specifically American) moral content; eruptive anticommunism; loathing of unions; frontier expansionism and Indian Wars as models; idealist rhetoric, but a non-Wilsonian idealism resting on entrepreneurial virtues and a restless search for new ventures, markets, and raw materials; Friedrich List or Adam Smith as ideologues, depending on market position.

*Role of the State:* Strong military departments but weak regulation of the economy; a heroic executive, a gutted State Department; strong FBI and covert action

capability; war capitalism is necessary, vast reinforcement of military branches in the meantime (often as a way to pork barrel for local constituencies). Neomercantilist in its conception of relations between states, but hostile to state interventions in markets at home.

*Social Constituency:* Declining national-market firms; labor-sensitive industries, especially textiles; independent oil companies; Republican Party right-wing, especially Western and Sun Belt constituencies resentful of Eastern establishment dominance, Rockefeller wing, and Eastern banks that control provision and credit; fundamentalist religious groupings that hate liberal theology or liberals ... ?

Cummings acknowledges the limits of these ideal typologies, even for an analysis of the 1940s–50s debates for which they are designed, so we should of course be cautious about employing them crudely. Moreover, a number of significant changes have taken place in the United States and in the global economy since the 1960s and 1970s that clearly affect these kinds of political blocs—some of which I will note forthwith—so we should be doubly cautious about extrapolating to the present from this kind of ideal typology of the past.

These cautionary notes notwithstanding, however, from a reading of any of the recent works on contemporary US imperialism it is clear that there is a very striking resemblance between, on the one hand, Cold War liberal internationalism and contemporary neoliberalism and, on the other hand, the Cold War rollback bloc and contemporary neoconservatism. This is especially clear in reference to the major economic interests served by each of the positions, but it is also quite clear in relation to the cultural and ideological moorings of the two blocs. In particular, just as the rollback constituency featured a strong antipathy to unions, strong religious (read: Christian) fundamentalism, and neomercantilist preferences in foreign relations combined with hostility to state interventions at home (aside from items such as military pork-barrel and specific ‘Listian’ measures to help special interests), so too does the contemporary neoconservative alliance. These similarities, moreover, are not a matter of the contemporary reemergence of isomorphic positions but rather can be shown to reflect the *continuity* over time of what Christison calls “just plain conservatism”. In this sense, I would argue, the specific contribution of the distinctly *neoconservative* ideologists in the Bush II administration is somewhat less significant than is frequently advertised.

In short, there are very strong continuities between the political bloc that has emerged as dominant under Bush II and the conservative political bloc that played such a crucial role in defining the right end of the political spectrum during the Cold War era. Moreover, there are also very strong continuities in the patterns of interaction between the two polar blocs over time. As Cummings notes (1990, page 29), though the Cold War foreign-policy establishment sometimes drifted strongly in the direction of rollback, it was also regularly forced to compromise with powerful liberal, capitalist elites, and for this reason much of the Cold War period was marked not by rollback policies but rather by containment policies that attempted to give each of the blocs a little of what they wanted. This is a situation not entirely dissimilar from the present, in which—neoconservative dominance within the Bush II regime notwithstanding—attacks on policy both by neoliberals and by ‘just plain liberals’ challenge some of the actions of the far right, if not always entirely effectively.

It is also worth noting here the continuities in what could be called the ‘geographies of empire’ favored by each of these blocs. Neil Smith (2003) has noted that the rise of the liberal internationalist bloc in the early 20th century represented a break with the previously favored, more overtly territorial forms of imperial practice that marked both European colonialism and 19th-century US expansionism. Liberal

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internationalists—especially immediately after World War 2—could envision indirectly controlling (from the centers of financial and manufacturing power that they occupied) a more internationalized process of surplus extraction without necessarily having to exercise direct forms of militarized governance. This form of imperial power could not do entirely without military force, which was required to establish and maintain the political economic framework within which US-centered capitalist power would be dominant, but it did not necessarily require ongoing colonial-style occupations because the weight of global dominance by US capitalists in the internationalized process of accumulation would tend in the direction of the desired outcomes.

By contrast, the rollback constituency depended heavily on forms of state activity that hearkened more readily to overtly territorial empire—activity which, though perhaps ‘backward looking’, made sense from the perspective of the interests involved. Thus, whereas liberal internationalists such as bankers and high-tech manufacturers might only have required forms of overseas military intervention that insured a favorably disposed government (including central bankers) and development of essential infrastructure, rollback interests groups such as military contractors and construction firms required a more sustained military interventionism, both to keep military contracts flowing and to legitimize state expenditures that subsidize and defend overseas investments in fixed capital.

In this specific sense, the conservative rollback bloc has typically been seen as more ‘statist’ and more militarist—and certainly the specific form of territoriality that its accumulation project expresses has differed somewhat from that which is identified with ‘nonterritorial’ liberal internationalism. Most noteworthy for my argument here, however, is the fact that these geographies of empire have maintained continuity over time. The neoliberal agenda descended from liberal internationalism is identified with a state-container jumping, ‘nonterritorial’ accumulation project; the neoconservative agenda descended from the conservative rollback bloc is identified with a statist, ‘territorial’ accumulation project.

For these reasons, therefore, it may be misleading to speak of the present form of US imperialism as new. Rather, in a sense, it would seem that what is playing out at the moment is an only slightly new variation on a well-established theme in US foreign-policy debates.

### **The post-Cold-War context of US imperialism**

This having been said, there are of course quite specific elements to the current context that give contemporary US imperialism some of its unique flavor. I will mention several such elements here in order to explain in what sense certain continuities have given way to differences. First, and most significantly, the collapse of a socialist threat to capitalism has undermined a crucial basis of broad international, capitalist unity. Consequently, the prospects of intercapitalist competition coming to the fore have increased and neoconservatives are likely to find that in spite of having taken the commanding heights of the US state they have limited space within which to construct their agendas without being challenged by other (increasingly internationalized) groups of capitalists on the grounds that they are promoting their own particular interests rather than general capitalist interests (Harvey, 2003, pages 206–207).

Second, the matter of narrowly neoconservative ideology, though too easily overrated, is not trivial. As has been frequently noted (for example, Johnson, 2004, pages 70–71; Sanders, 1983), the neoconservatives emerged from the Cold War Democratic Party, and especially from the wing that favored containment. A significant feature of the contemporary crop of neoconservatives is their strongly pro-Zionist orientation, especially evident in the cases of Wolfowitz, Perle, and the Undersecretary of Defense

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for Policy Douglas Feith (Johnson, 2004, pages 234–235; Mann, 2003, page 3). A plausible reason for the migration of these particular neoconservatives to the Republican Party relates to transformations in specific features of the major US parties, and in the politics of the Middle East. Historically, the Republican Party was marred by a strong strain of anti-Semitism. In a similar way to other groups that originally arrived in the United States as laborers down the rungs of the economic ladder from earlier white, western-European immigrants, many southern-European and eastern-European Jewish workers found a more supportive environment within the New Deal Democratic Party of the 1930s than in the Republican Party. Consequently, the Democratic Party became the site of the most intensive lobbying by US Jews supportive of the creation of the state of Israel, and in fact became, until the 1980s, the most aggressive of the two major US parties in offering Israel unconditional support (Chomsky, 1999a).

Jewish support for the Democratic Party, however, would naturally be expected to depend on a variety of factors, and for wealthy and/or conservative Jewish leaders in the United States, established positions in relationship to the Democrats and residual anti-Semitism in the Republican Party have often stood as the only major barriers to support for the strongly probusiness Republicans. Thus, by the 1980s, a number of pro-Zionist and Israeli leaders seem to have made significant inroads into the (by then less overtly anti-Semitic) Republican arena. This was a transformation facilitated by the rise of Likud as the predominant Israeli political party from the time of the regime of Menachim Begin onwards. Begin's Likud, which has dominated Israeli politics for most of the period since the late 1970s (Masala, 2000; Said, 1992), displaced an Israeli Labor Party that had been the most natural ally of the US Democrats. Within the United States, the Reagan administration struck up an increasingly supportive and friendly relationship with Likud, in spite of an ongoing preference for the Labor Party within much of the US foreign-policy establishment (Chomsky, 1999a).

In this context, the far right in the United States has become home to a quite bizarre, hybrid ideology of Christian fundamentalism and right-wing Zionism. Although right-wing—and ultimately anti-Semitic—Christians remain prominent among such rightists, many now hew to an ideology in which Zionist settler colonialism in the Middle East, and the conflicts that it is stirring, is seen in a positive light. These conflicts are interpreted as presaging the 'end times' in which God will take up all Christians (rapture), eventually returning them to rule an earth restored after its apocalyptic destruction, with Jews having one last chance to repent and acknowledge Jesus as Lord before the millennium (Harvey, 2003, pages 202–203; Mann, 2003, page 8; Monbiot, 2004).

I don't wish to dwell too long on these ideological nuances, but the relevant point here is that the US Christian far right has made its peace for the time being with US right-wing Zionists, and in this context the neoconservatives have come to have an especially marked (and perhaps disastrous) effect on US policies in the Middle East, now clearly the focal point of most foreign-policy activity (Chomsky, 1999a; 2003; Gregory, 2004; Mann, 2003). This is by no means a narrowly ideologically driven phenomenon, and without the central interests of oil companies and long-standing US ambitions to control Middle Eastern (and now Central Asian) production and pricing it is doubtful that neoconservatives could exercise the influence which they do (Chomsky, 2003, pages 162–163; Harvey, 2003, pages 1–25; Johnson, 2004, pages 167–185). Moreover, many of the leading Zionist neoconservatives are not merely ideologists but themselves have important investments in major industries at the core of the neoconservative bloc (Johnson, 2004, page 235; Labaton, 2003, page C1). Nonetheless, the emergence of such Zionists as a crucial force within the neoconservative

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project marks one significant transformation of the political blocs that have developed since the 1930s.

A third important post-Cold-War transformation relates to the global economy and the relationship between US liberal internationalists and US labor organizations. By the late 1960s many of the firms that had supported the New Deal labor accord and liberal internationalist foreign policy were facing declining profit rates, and what ensued was a restructuring of the US economy in which the major economic powers behind the liberal internationalist alliance broke the labor accord and began the process of corporate downsizing and neoliberal rollback of the state (Harvey, 1989; 2003, pages 63–64, 184). As mentioned above, the ideological compatibilities of the neoliberal and neoconservative blocs around this project of restructuring is highlighted by the fact that both tendencies came very overtly to the foreground under the Reagan administration.

One further point about the ascendancy of neoliberalism is in order here. Although neoliberal rhetoric concerning the decline of state power is—for reasons already outlined—frequently overplayed, it is important to recognize that neoliberals have in fact undercut certain national state-regulatory functions and have simultaneously put increasing effort into reregulating the global economy through *transnational* statist institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). One should not overstate the degree to which these kinds of transnational organizations supplant the power of the US state: institutions like the International Monetary Fund can still be seen as taking their marching orders from the US Treasury Department (Harvey, 2003, pages 72–73; Stiglitz, 2002, pages 96–104; compare Sparke, 2003), and even less US-dominated fora such as the WTO still depend fundamentally on the decisions of groups of national governments. But at the same time it has been argued that the ascendancy of neoliberalism is in fact a truly transnational phenomenon which is based not only on the internationalism of US-based capitalists but also on the internationalism of capitalists based in many other parts of the world (Robinson, 2002; 2003). As such, the development of statist regulatory organizations such as the WTO does in fact represent *some* hollowing out—not of state power in general but of the unilateral economic capacities of the US national state. At the same time, the focus of many neoliberals since the 1980s on building transnational statist institutions such as the WTO has also provided an opportunity for members of the neoconservative bloc to colonize more intensively major institutions of the US national state—a project they have undertaken with considerable success (Rupert, 2000).

Neoconservatives and the Republican Party have thus come to have a stronger presence in the US national state than they had throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, but the Democratic Party has managed to remain a player in liberal internationalist–neoliberal policymaking at the national level by moving its own political center of gravity to the right and by shedding many of its commitments to organized labor (Ferguson and Rogers, 1986). Its strong commitment to TNCs and neoliberalism was especially evidenced by President Clinton’s aggressive support for the North American Free Trade Agreement and the WTO (against organized labor sentiment) and by the role of firms such as Goldman-Sachs—especially its former managing director, Robert Rubin, who became Secretary of Treasury—within Clinton administration policymaking circles. What has emerged from the transformation of liberal internationalism, therefore, is a neoliberal political bloc marked by many of the same characteristics identified with the liberal internationalism of Cumings’s analysis, albeit shorn of its commitments to organized labor. The result has been declining popular support for the Democratic Party, evidenced primarily by increasing levels of voter abstention compared with the 1950s. In this context, the Republican Party—whose core voter base is

small but reliable—has emerged as more powerful since the end of the 1970s and although it is by no means a party of labor it has also been able to pick up some disgruntled labor voters, especially from among those in tune with its cultural messages (Harvey, 2003, page 188; Rupert, 2000).

In addition, as labor support for the Democrats waned from the 1960s onward, the Republicans successfully deployed what they called ‘the Southern strategy’—namely, appealing to racist tendencies among white voters (and not only in the US South) by implicitly or explicitly identifying nonwhite welfare recipients and beneficiaries of affirmative action programs as the cause of downward mobility among whites, and peddling lurid images of the threats to whites posed by implicitly or explicitly nonwhite criminals. This strategy and other factors have eroded the Democrats’ long-standing basis of support in the US South, converting it into a crucial regional basis of support for neoconservative agendas in both domestic and foreign policy (Martin, 2002).

It is in this context that the so-called new imperialism has taken shape. The new imperialism is not in fact entirely new, but it does represent the national dominance within the United States of political forces that in many previous periods of US history were checked more strongly at the national level by a comparatively liberal and labor-backed party.<sup>(4)</sup> With the rise of transnational neoliberalism, the breaking of the labor accord, and the relative decline of the Democrats, the right wing of the Republican Party has been in a position to formulate its foreign-policy objectives with less consideration of the positions of liberal domestic opponents—though certain ventures in the Cold War era might bear comparison, as I will suggest below (Cumings, 1990, page 29; and compare Chomsky, 2003).

As a consequence of this transformation, the major opposition to US foreign-policy initiatives under Bush II have come less from *within* the United States (though there has certainly been domestic opposition) than from *outside*—notably, both from US geopolitical allies and from well-positioned groups of international capitalists. In this context, too, US imperialism *appears* somewhat new in that for one of the first times since the late 19th and early 20th centuries it seems to be formulated in the absence of strong concern about the opinions of international allies (Kolko, 2004; Mann, 2003, pages 82–83). What I hope to have pointed out, however, is that, although the evolving post-Cold-War context has in fact imparted some novelties to the current US imperial project, these novelties are less those of a break from the past than they are the more forceful emergence of long-standing tendencies.

## **Confronting the ‘new imperialism’: antimilitarism or anticapitalism?**

### **Theorizing terrains of conflict and struggle**

In the foregoing class-fractional analysis of US political blocs I have tried to simultaneously emphasize the distinctive aspects of these blocs and the integral ways in which they are interconnected with one another. In the present section I want to further elaborate one aspect of the analysis by reference to Poulantzas’s (1978) conception of the state as a part of the social division of labor.

It is crucial to note that in the Gramscian analysis presented so far *both* the neoliberal and the neoconservative political blocs are seen as imbricated in—and as articulating their projects through—state institutions. Moreover, states are not seen here as separate institutional sites of political power, as in Weberian theories, but are seen as ensembles of institutions within which class, class-fractional, and other social groupings struggle to achieve their objectives (Jessop, 1990). The class-fractional groups foregrounded here struggle simultaneously not only through the state but also through

<sup>(4)</sup> It is worth comparing here Gramsci’s comments on how, with the decline of ideological hegemony, capitalist elites become more likely to resort to force (Gramsci, 1971, pages 60–61).

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the market, and through the media, schools, religious organizations, and other cultural institutions (these last constituting part of the state in Gramsci's extended conception of this term), drawing their power not from any single institutional site (government agencies, corporations, churches, etc) but rather from the way in which they are networked across such sites and are able to draw and deploy resources from each. In this sort of Gramscian approach, classes and class relations are thus taken to be more fundamental in explaining social changes than are institutions—not because institutions are unimportant but because institutions are produced through class and class-relevant social struggles and because a full description of class struggles thus *includes* an analysis of how such institutions are brought into being, sustained, and transformed. For this reason, a Weberian perspective that starts from the assumption of an autonomous state as the locus of institutional powers that are deployed to police or regulate class struggle is untenable from a Gramscian (or Poulantzian) perspective.

Such an approach directly relates to Poulantzas's claim that the state should be seen not as standing above but *as part of* the social division of labor (for example, Poulantzas, 1978, pages 54–62). In essence, what Poulantzas recognizes in making this claim is that capitalism develops not only because of direct processes of production and capital accumulation but also because of the indirect forms of production and social reproduction that make such processes possible—including the separation, upon which the state is partly founded, of manual labor from mental labor. A full description of the capitalist social division of labor is thus not only a description of what more orthodox Marxists refer to as 'productive' labor (for example, Shaikh and Tonak, 1994) but is also a description of the kinds of labor carried out both inside and outside of formally 'economic' institutions in order to secure (intentionally or otherwise) the reproduction of capitalist social relations—a point recognized and forcefully elaborated, for example, by *autonomist* Marxists as well as in a long line of feminist writings.

This sort of Poulantzian argument was implied earlier in the claim that the major interests behind liberal internationalist–neoliberal and rollback–neoconservative blocs are interdependent. Financial capitalists need not only the production of goods and services but also industries connected to state repression, for service both in repressing militant labor organizations and in combating unruly competitors. Military contractors need not only supplier industries but also financing and overall growth of a capitalist economy to sustain their own projects. At the same time, these varied needs related to production and social reproduction create a terrain rife with potential for intercapitalist struggle and competition.

### **Opposing US imperialism**

Although specific tactical agendas for opposition to US imperialism may not directly fall out of the theoretical arguments presented here, I would nonetheless assert that these arguments have certain general, practical political implications, some of which are at odds with various suggestions made by critics of Bush II administration foreign policy. I outline what I see in the way of such implications by noting three broad themes that emerge from this theorization of continuities and discontinuities in US imperialism.

First, though it can certainly be argued that the Bush II administration has pushed some especially aggressive ventures in US foreign policy—including large, sustained troop commitments for the occupation of Iraq—it is apparent that the kinds of social forces underlying the neoconservative version of US imperialism have long been active. Indeed, in spite of the very real and present dangers posed by neoconservative imperialism, it is not entirely accurate to see it as posing novel threats. For example, the same sort of constituency backed Douglas MacArthur's destructive and reckless march

through northern Korea, which intensified the Korean War dramatically, leading to millions more deaths (Cumings, 1990, pages 708–756; 2004, pages 39–40). Throughout the 1950s, moreover, ‘just plain conservatives’ within the Eisenhower administration practiced nuclear diplomacy and fundamentally unilateral threats against enemies on a regular basis (for example, Cumings, 1990, pages 747–756; 2004, pages 20–26; Williams et al, 1985, page 138). Indeed, so aggressive was the stance of US policymakers in Asia during the 1950s that even the hawkish US Army Chief of Staff, General Matthew B Ridgway, felt compelled to express his concern that civilian policymakers were pushing in the direction of ‘preventative war’ with China (Williams et al, 1985, page 321, note 23), a doctrine that has no legitimacy within international law but which the Bush II administration has now in essence affirmed as a basis for its actions, amidst much international condemnation (Chomsky, 2003, page 12; Cumings, 2004, pages 95–97). As conflict in Southeast Asia escalated in the 1960s, conservative forces backing the Nixon administration also encouraged his famed efforts to present himself in foreign affairs as a ‘madman’, capable of nearly anything—a role he enthusiastically pursued through efforts such as the bombing of Cambodia in the early 1970s and the 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi. The neoconservatives that came to power under Reagan also pushed aggressive and unilateral actions in Central America, and as with the previously mentioned activities, these met with much international condemnation (Chomsky, 1986; 2003, pages 96–108). Again, if there is anything new in the current neoconservative agenda it is less in the commitment to aggressive use of military force than it is in the specific context in which that force is being exercised.

Second, although the neoconservative version of US imperialism is identifiable as an overt form of militarism (Mann, 2003, pages 252–268), it is also—both historically and in the present—an integral part of US capitalism, as I have already argued. For this reason, it is not accurate to identify US militarism as a force in its own right—as, for example, does Chalmers Johnson in his otherwise superb critique of US imperialism (Johnson, 2004, pages 23–24). US militarism is one face of a long-standing and complex development of US capitalism, and, though military industries are especially happy with the kinds of state commitments made by the Bush II administration, the backers of liberal internationalism and neoliberalism have also depended upon and supported military force where necessary for protection of their own interests, not excluding those of their own most favored military contractors (Chomsky, 1999b; 2003; Johnson, 2004, page 56).

Third, and following directly from the last point, US militarism and dangerous forms of imperial brinkmanship are not the sole preserve of right-wing zealots. For example, a recent conference analyzing the Cuban missile crisis, and involving participants in the crisis, showed that the Kennedy administration very nearly touched off a nuclear conflagration in its willingness to confront the Soviets over placement of missiles in Cuba. Perhaps only the humanity of a Soviet submarine officer who on October 27, 1962 blocked orders to fire nuclear-armed torpedoes averted this catastrophe (Chomsky, 2003, page 74). Indeed, throughout history since World War 2 there is a solid record of US militarism that has been carried forward by Democrats and Republicans. The Truman administration’s push to war in Korea (a war that killed 3–4 million Koreans and Chinese) (Cumings, 1990; 2004), the Kennedy–Johnson administration’s push to war in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (with another 3–4 million Southeast Asians killed) (Kahin, 1986; Kolko, 1985), the Carter administration’s decision to escalate conflicts with Iran, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (with over 100 000 Central Americans perishing in the resulting wars) (Chomsky, 1986; Robinson, 2003), and the Clinton administration’s dubious ‘humanitarian intervention’ in the Balkans (Chomsky, 1999b; 2001), along with support for military repression in

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Columbia (with thousands killed and over 1 million people displaced in the 1990s) (Chomsky, 2001, page 65) only stand as some of the most obvious examples. In each of these cases, Republican Party administrations were able to carry forward commitments made by earlier Democratic regimes, sometimes exceeding the latter in their degree of recklessness, but rarely differing severely in the basic orientation or modalities of their imperial practice.

These points have implications for opposition to US imperialism. Most directly, they suggest that narrow opposition to militarism does not address deeper roots of the phenomenon. Militarism has been identified as the core of US neoconservative imperialism by Weberian critics such as Johnson and Michael Mann (Johnson, 2004; Mann, 2003). Weberians consider states to have considerable autonomy from class forces and economic processes, even if these are interconnected with state power, and from this perspective it is possible to conceive of neoconservative imperialism as generated in a fashion that is largely independent of specifics of the capital accumulation process (see, for example, Mann, 1993). However, from the Gramscian perspective I have outlined, such a viewpoint misses the point that, although any given, specific act of militarism may be contingent and conjunctural, the overall need for repressive force within capitalist society is not, and this imparts the necessity both of some form of military production and of a state apparatus geared to the use of repressive force. As such, militarism is an unsurprising and routine handmaiden of capitalist development—even if, as with most social phenomena, it cannot be deemed necessary in an ontological sense.

Weberian assumptions of an autonomous state are not, of course, shared by most Marxist theorists. David Harvey's reading of US imperialism, for example, suggests that militarism is much more closely tied to the overall process of capital accumulation than Weberians imply (Harvey, 2003). Harvey's overall analysis of US imperialism is very close to the analysis offered in the present paper in its basics, but I would like to highlight one significant difference between the conclusions Harvey draws and those I would draw.

Harvey recognizes that the internationalization of capital may put considerable restraints on the unilateral exercise of imperialism by US neoconservatives (2003, pages 206–207). This is a position in accord with the claim that liberal internationalism, as it has mutated into neoliberalism, has become somewhat more representative of the rise of a *global* capitalist class (compare Robinson, 2002; 2003; Sklair, 2001). This globalized fraction of capital, though still primarily led by capitalists whose interests are most anchored within the US economy, is neither in need of nor pleased with the specific forms of militarist belligerence practiced by the neoconservatives. Their ability—and need, in a highly competitive global economic environment—to redirect investment to places other than the United States would enable them to substantially undermine the economic base of US militarism in the long run. This is a point recognized recently by a number of political commentators (for example, Greider, 2003; 2004; Wallerstein, 2003).

The check that neoliberal capitalists can potentially place on neoconservative militarism raises the possibility, noted by Harvey, that Karl Kautsky's prediction of 'ultra-imperialism'—a relatively peaceful, if temporary, resolution of capitalist competition through collaboration by an international consortium of imperial states—might yet prove to have merit (Harvey, 2003, page 209). The problem with this sort of view is that, even as a form of 'ultra-imperialism' in relations between advanced capitalist states has evolved since World War 2, militarism has become increasingly focused on selective interventions, primarily within the Global South, targeting states that cannot seriously respond to imperial military power. This form of imperialism is clearly on the agenda for the near future, as Harvey recognizes in noting that under any

‘ultra-imperialist’ spatial fix there would be continued struggle—particularly in the Global South—over access to resources (Harvey, 2003, page 210). The fact that repressive force is always used and legitimized in these struggles means that the socioeconomic and politico-ideological foundations of militarism cannot very likely be undercut under such conditions.

Moreover, though it is clear that many of the most globally oriented neoliberal investors have shown considerable disdain for the US occupation of Iraq, it is not at all clear that they will move to dismantle the more general foundations of militarism—even in the United States, let alone within the smaller military garrisons that exist all around the world. Neoliberals themselves need repressive force for specific purposes, and not only have they been willing to countenance its direct deployment outside the Global North but they have even shown considerable tolerance for its more limited deployment *within* the Global North—including the increased policing and incarceration of members of communities of color in the United States.

All of this would lead me to conclude, sadly, that Harvey’s hopes for an ‘ultra-imperialist’ moment allowing the eventual, gradual transition to something better than capitalism are misplaced. If openings for more radical change do not currently exist or cannot be developed and used to produce social arrangements that seriously curtail major dynamics of capitalism, then the world—and especially people in the Global South—will almost surely continue to face the very real threats posed by US imperialism and militarism.

## Conclusion

The ‘new imperialism’ is not entirely new and cannot be successfully confronted as if it were. Rather, it shows tremendous continuity with past forms of US imperialism on the basis of the fact that it is anchored in class and class-fractional interests which have retained considerable continuity over time. Classes and class fractions do change, and the changes that have occurred since the end of the Cold War have put US imperialism on a slightly different footing than it had during the Cold War. This, of course, affects tactical considerations concerning how to challenge US imperialism and the dangerous military ventures it continually generates. But the transformations that have occurred since the 1970s have not changed certain basic features of US imperialism that have been identified since at least the 1930s. There are in fact new things under the sun, but the basic conditions for undermining destructive US imperial practices are not currently among them.

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