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Serving the Few

Michael Parenti

There are those who criticize U.S. foreign policy for its blunders and incoherence. To be sure, Washington policymakers are sometimes frustrated by unintended consequences, taken by surprise, or thwarted by forces beyond their control. They are neither infallible nor omnipotent. But neither are they the fools some people take them to be. Overall, U.S. foreign policy has been remarkably successful in undermining popular revolutions and buttressing conservative free-market regimes in every region of the world.

Many Americans recognize that politicians often lie, that they loudly proclaim a dedication to the people while quietly serving powerful interests. But when it comes to U.S. foreign policy, many of us retreat from that judgment. Suddenly we find it hard to believe that U.S. leaders deceptively pursue repressive policies abroad, policies that have little to do with peace, democracy, and social justice.

On the infrequent occasions where the political mainstream and major media debate foreign policy, criticism goes no further than operational questions: Are our leaders relying too much (or too little) on military force? Are they failing to act decisively? Will the policy prove too costly? Rarely, if ever, do they examine basic policy premises.

Instead, they assume the United States has a right to intervene in other nation's affairs to restore order, thwart aggression, fight terrorism, or whatever. It is taken as given that this country resists unjust aggression but never practices it, that other nations not the U.S. cause conflicts, that leftist revolutionaries are dangerous but rightist reactionaries usually are not (and that defining what *is* a leftist or a rightist is unnecessary), and that something called "stability" is more important than revolutionary change and popular agitation.

Actually, U.S. policy serves mostly the favored few rather than the common people at home or abroad. From Argentina to Zaire, from East Timor to the Western Sahara, U.S.-sponsored counterrevolutionary campaigns of attrition, have taken millions of lives, with tens of millions wounded, maimed, displaced, exiled, or emotionally shattered. Yet one hears hardly a word about this hidden holocaust in what passes for U.S. political discourse.

We are told that the U.S. must demonstrate its resolve, must constantly display its strength, flex its muscles, and thereby act like a great superpower. This will prevent us from being pushed around by some small upstart nation (an argument used to justify everything from the pulverization of Vietnam to the massacre of Iraq). Any failure to apply our power, we hear, undermines our credibility and invites aggression. One wonders why U.S. leaders feel endlessly motivated to

show what everyone is already painfully aware of: that the U.S. is the world's strongest military power.

Some say the need arises from a macho insecurity that generations of U.S. leaders have psychologically suffered in common. Presidents do often engage in macho posturing to convince people they are decisive and forceful. The key enforcement instrument of state power, the military, is built on machismo—with all its attendant emphasis on toughness, domination, and violence. But macho feelings do not themselves explain U.S. policies of forceful intervention.

If the U.S. global military apparatus arises merely from the macho need to dominate, then why do U.S. leaders want to dominate some nations rather than others? Machismo fails to explain why Washington sides so consistently with landowners, military autocrats, and transnational corporate interests rather than with workers, peasants, students, and egalitarian reformers.

Most macho posturing allows presidents to show their “toughness” and decisive leadership. It helps improve their ratings. When early in his presidency, President Bill Clinton launched a homicidal air strike against Iraq, he was flexing his image muscles, showing how he was no wimp and could use lethal force when “necessary.” The goal is not macho indulgence per se but getting reelected. If crossdressing in skirt and heels would guarantee reelection, Clinton and every other male politician would throw machismo to the wind and dress themselves accordingly.

Political leaders know that a show of force rallies the public around the flag, since the people have been made to believe that the nation's survival and their own security depends on such force. Yet most ordinary citizens want to avoid combat; instead they must be drafted. Even most volunteers join the army not from a macho desire to kill and be killed but rather to seek a career opportunity or some means of support. Rather than being impelled by their testosterone, most soldiers have to be ordered into battle under threat of severe sanctions.

Often we are told that the U.S. not only has a right to intervene abroad but an obligation. It is said that “we must accept the responsibilities thrust upon us.” Yet who has thrust this obligation upon us, and why the U.S. must meddle in every corner of the world, remains unclear. In 1992, President George Bush announced that the U.S. was “the world leader” and that other countries expected us to act as such. Each White House occupant, unable to clean up our waterways or develop rational energy systems or provide jobs and decent housing for millions at home, proclaims himself the leader of the entire world.

But in practice, being “world leader” means that the U.S. will maintain the global system of free market investment and profit accumulation. The U.S. must bring resistant elements to heel, using every form of control and attrition to keep various peoples within the client-state fold. Those who seek alternatives must be made to cry “uncle,” as President Ronald Reagan once said about revolutionary Nicaragua. And indeed it did, along with revolutionary Ethiopia and Mozambique, after enough years of U.S.-sponsored battering.

One repeatedly hears that U.S. leaders oppose communist countries because they lack political democracy. But successive administrations in Washington have

supported some of the world's most repressive regimes, which have regularly practiced torture, intimidation, assassination and mass arrests. Washington has also supported some of the worst right-wing counterrevolutionary rebel cut-throats: Savimbi's Unita in Angola, Renamo in Mozambique, the mujahideen in Afghanistan, and even (in the 1980s) the Pol Pot lunatics in Cambodia.

Consider the case of Cuba. We're told that decades of U.S. hostility toward Cuba—including embargo, sabotage, and invasion—have resulted from our distaste for Castro's autocratic government and from our concern for the freedoms of the Cuban people. But why this sudden urge to "restore" Cuban liberty? In the decades before the 1959 Cuban Revolution, successive U.S. administrations backed a brutally repressive autocracy headed by General Fulgencio Batista.

The significant but unspoken difference was that Batista was a comprador leader who kept Cuba wide open to U.S. capital penetration. In contrast, Castro eliminated the private corporate control of the economy, nationalized U.S. holdings, and renovated the class structure more equally and collectively: that's what makes him so insufferable.

Far from supporting democracy around the world, the U.S. national security state since World War II has actively destroyed progressive democratic governments in some two dozen countries. In justifying the 1973 overthrow of Chile's democratically elected president, Salvador Allende, Henry Kissinger argued that when pressed to choose between the economy and democracy, we must save the economy. More precisely, Kissinger wanted to save the *private big corporate* economy.

In two short years, Allende's Popular Unity government noticeably shifted the gross national income away from wealthy elites who lived off interest, dividends, and rents, and toward those who lived off wages and salaries. In Allende's Chile, the rich had their consumer goods rationed, and were expected to pay taxes for the first time. Some of their holdings and businesses were nationalized. Meanwhile, the poor benefited from public works employment, literacy programs, worker cooperatives, and a free half-liter of milk each day for every child.

A few of Chile's radio and television stations began offering a view of public affairs that differed from the ideological monopoly of the nation's business-owned media. Far from endangering democracy, Allende's Popular Unity government was endangering the privileged oligarches by expanding democracy. What alarmed leaders like Kissinger was not that social democratic reforms were failing but that they were succeeding. The trend toward politico-economic equality had to be stopped. In the name of saving Chile's democracy, the CIA and the White House destroyed it, instituting a fascist dictatorship that tortured, executed, and "disappeared" thousands, and suppressed all opposition media, political parties, labor unions, and peasant organizations.

Immediately after the military coup, General Motors, which had closed its plants Allende's election, resumed operations, demonstrating how much more comfortable Big Capital is with fascism than social democracy. Far from rescuing the economy, the CIA-sponsored coup provoked an era of skyrocketing inflation and national debt, with drastic increases in unemployment, poverty, and hunger.

Official Washington cannot reveal to the American people that its gargantuan military expenditures and belligerent interventions really makes the world safe for General Motors, General Electric, General Dynamics, and all the other generals. Instead we are told that our nation's security is at stake. But people do not always believe that mini-powers like Cuba, Panama or Nicaragua, or a micro-power like Grenada, really threaten our survival. So during the Cold War we were told that these nations were merely instruments of Soviet world aggrandizement. For decades, "Soviet expansionism" served as the justification for U.S. interventionism.

But why does U.S. global interventionism continue well after the USSR and the Warsaw Pact military alliance have dissolved and the Cold War has been declared to be over? As CIA Director Robert Gates admitted, "The threat to the United States of deliberate attack from that quarter has all but disappeared for the foreseeable future."

Officials are now trying to convince us that new enemies suddenly have emerged. Former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney announced that the Soviet Union had not been the only threat; the world was full of other dangerous adversaries that he apparently had previously overlooked. Now we discovered that troubles could arise from within Third World countries themselves, even without any Soviet instigation.

U.S. policymakers and their dutiful, corporate-dominated media mouthpieces have alerted us to the mortal peril posed by international terrorists, Islamic fanatics, narcokiller cartels, nuclear madmen, and Third World Hitlers. The few remaining communist governments such as Cuba and North Korea are no longer instruments of Moscow but rather evils in their own right.

For decades, we thought we needed our enormous navy to protect us from the USSR. Now, with that threat gone, chief of naval operations Admiral Trost, explained that we nevertheless still need an enormous navy. The navy, he said, must go to trouble spots and "show the flag"—vintage imperialist terminology for the practice of sending battleships to foreign ports to intimidate restive populations with a display of strength.

The ships do not show the flag so much as they show their guns: the long-range ones that can lob death and destruction many miles inland. We used to call such displays "gunboat diplomacy." Today, it's less likely to be a gunboat or battleship than a naval task force with aircraft carriers, fighter bombers, missiles, and helicopter gunships.

Trost has also argued that we needed a powerful navy for "local and regional conflicts." It was the self-anointed task of the U.S to police a troubled world. But why? For whose benefit and at whose expense was the policing done? Officials do not usually tell us that their job is to protect global transnational corporations from egalitarian social movements. Instead they use coded terms such as "local and regional conflicts." When all else fails, they talk about defending "our interests" abroad, a catch-all phrase that justifies almost any action.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton vowed to chart a new course for our nation's future, reminding us that we must have the "courage to change." But once elected, Clinton remained in lockstep with his conservative

Republican predecessors, pushing for increased U.S. military spending, flaunting the U.S. as a global superpower, and vowing that “U.S. interests” around the world will be supported by military force when necessary.

Like his predecessors, Clinton allowed no critical examination of what those interests might be. As a member of the corporate-dominated, elite policymaking bodies—Council on Foreign Relations, the Bilderberg Conference, and the Trilateral Commission, Clinton is—ideologically and personal—part of the inner circle of power, not one to rock the boat, let alone change its course.

Some critics view the U.S. military establishment as nothing but a wasteful boondoggle. They often view U.S. foreign policy as stupid. But what may be costly and misguided for one class interest (ordinary citizens and taxpayers) may be rewarding and productive for another (defense contractors and military brass). This might explain why U.S. military spending remains at a level far above the height of Cold War levels (even after adjusting for inflation).

Essentially, military spending happens to be one of the greatest sources of domestic capital accumulation. It constitutes a form of public expenditure that business likes very much. When the government spends funds on the not-for-profit sector of the economy—such as the postal service, publicly-owned railroads, or public hospitals—it demonstrates how the public can create goods, services, and jobs, and expand the tax base, without the need for private gain by corporate investors. Such spending competes with the private market.

In contrast, a defense contract is like any other business contract, only better. The taxpayers’ money covers all production risks. Unlike refrigerator manufacturers who must worry about selling their refrigerators, weapons manufacturers have a product that already has been contracted, complete with guaranteed cost overruns. The government also picks up most of the research and development costs of manufacturing the product.

Military spending opens up a potentially limitless area of demand. How much military security or supremacy is enough? There are always new weapons to be developed and updated. Furthermore, most military contracts are awarded without competitive bidding, so arms manufacturers pretty much get the price they ask for. Hence, it’s tempting to develop ever more elaborate and costly weapons and supplies, that will be ever more profitable.

No wonder defense contractors enjoy a rate of return substantially higher than that usually available on the civilian market. No wonder corporate leaders have not rushed to cut military spending. Why dismantle their limitless, low risk, high profit, multibillion dollar cornucopia? Arms-spending bolsters the corporate private sector, even as it impoverishes the not-for-profit public sector.

These, then, comprise the two basic reasons why the U.S. assiduously remains an armed superpower even in the absence of a real enemy: First, keeping the world safe for global capital accumulation requires a massive military establishment. Second, a massive military itself constitutes a source of immense capital accumulation.

U.S. Americans should understand how, in the name of peace, militarists wage a perpetual silent war against the peoples of the world. We should understand that we have an interest in ending defense-industry welfarism. And we should

realize that we gain nothing by supporting a global interventionism that plunders the world's resources of the world and accumulates profits for the few, while impoverishing the many at home and abroad.