

Gulf War and the New World Order

Author(s): James Petras

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar. 2-9, 1991, Vol. 26, No. 9/10 (Mar. 2-9, 1991), pp. 482-484

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4397395>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly*

JSTOR

Gulf War and the New World Order

James Petras

The US war in the Gulf is, in its broadest contours, an effort by the US to define a new military-centred global order in which markets, income and resource shares are defined not by technological market power, but by political military dominance.

THE United States war in the Gulf is an attempt to recreate Washington's role as world policeman, to re-subordinate Europe to US power, to intimidate the Third World into submission. In a sense it is an attempt to regain the position of global supremacy held by the United States at the end of the Second World War. In this sense George Bush is executing the political vision of the Reagan period in its most extreme fashion. The massive buildup of military power, the worldwide pressure on clients, allies, and neutrals to collaborate, the vast economic expenditures, the unprecedented unleashing of aerial bombardment, all speak of the momentous historical changes that underlie this war.

The preparation for this war demonstrates the enormous capacity and resources that Washington has at its disposal. It also reflects a deep-rooted sense of decline and the fear of the growing challenges to that global supremacy. The war is not about 'oil'—and even less about 'self-determination' (no country can match the US record of violations over the past two decades), but about creating the foundations for launching a new set of political, economic, and social relations to sustain the United States as the dominant power in the world. That is the meaning of the Bush and Baker vision of a New World Order and the war that is being waged on its behalf.

Prior to the Gulf War there were numerous indications that the global decline of the United States was accelerating: in Eastern Europe and Russia the 'ideological victory' over Stalinism also revealed the tremendous incapacity of the US to provide economic resources to 'reshape' these economies to its needs or even to subsidise new client regimes. Instead, most observers saw Germany as the dominant power in the region. In western Europe the decline of NATO substantially weakened US leverage over European governments and economic policy; European-centred military and security proposals paralleled deeper economic integration. At the policy level, declining influence became obvious in Washington's incapacity to impose its liberal agricultural and 'services' (banking, finances, etc) agenda during the Uruguay round of the GATT meetings. The proximity of 1992 and the union of Europe is seen as a strategic threat, closing off markets in

western Europe and challenging the position of the US elsewhere.

The cumulative gains of Japan and its virtual displacement of the United States as the major investor and trading partner in Asia—the most dynamic growth region in the world—is a clear signal of declining influence. In a world in which global power is increasingly determined by industrial and financial activities and market exchanges based on strong industrial states, Washington strategists must have recognised that the US is a sure loser.

The decline of US global power is even evident in Latin America, where haphazard efforts have been made to preserve areas of traditional domination. Bush's 'Enterprise for the Americas' proposal was more rhetoric than substance, more pillage of existing markets and resources than any strategic commitment to large-scale, long-term investments to expand productive capacity. The initial sums promised (\$ 300 million) would cover Latin America's foreign debt payments for four days. More to the point, the continuing massive outflows of interest payments and profits from Latin America to the US (\$ 35 billion/year) and the incapacity of the United States to reconstruct the economies of small, reconquered nations (Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua) demonstrate the tremendous gap between the power of the US to dominate and its incapacity to rebuild economically viable client states.

This global context of deteriorating power—power lost to capitalist competition and Third-World challengers—would, if it continued over time, either force internal structural changes in the United States or lead to the relegation of the US to a status of non-hegemony. The impending loss of global supremacy and the incapacity to take economic advantage of the openings in East Europe, Russia, China, and the rest of Asia is frustrating to US policy-makers. Blocked by their economic weakness from seizing the new openings, Washington's frustration has increased because of the tremendous stockpile of advanced military weaponry at its disposal. The disjuncture between military and economic power in the new post-cold war conjuncture has been acutely felt and was instrumental in launching the Gulf War. Of what use were guided missiles and stealth bombers in competing for in-

fluence in western European markets? How were Pentagon budgets to compete with Deutschbank loans for influence in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union? The contradiction was transparent: in the post-cold war period (and even before), the rules for achieving global power were rooted in competition in the world market, while the US was still geared toward projections of military power.

The US war in the Gulf is in its deepest sense a means of changing the rules of global power: of subordinating economic competitors to military power; of transforming economic competitors into docile bankers of US military conquests; of converting economic resources from markets toward war subsidies; of disaggregating European alliances in favour of US-centred coalitions; of trading Third World debt payments for military contingents under US command.

The Gulf War is in its broadest contours an effort to *reverse* world historical trends that are moving to relegate the United States to the status of a second-class power. It is meant to define a new military-centred global order in which markets, income, and resource shares are defined not by technological-market power, but by political-military dominance. Under these rules Washington's comparative advantage in military power would ensure US global supremacy, and would undermine the capacity of its competitors to mount an effective challenge to its position.

The Bush administration's attempt to change the rules defining global power relations and economic conditions—internal and external—under which imperial revivalism takes place, will have a profound effect on US society as well as on future relations with competitors. Launching a major war at a time of declining economic activity and deteriorating urban life means that, unlike previous wars, this one will absorb scarce economic resources and further erode social conditions. It will undermine public services and increase financial instability. This imperialist war cannot provide economic pay-offs for labour, tying the working class to the war through higher wages and better jobs. This war exploits labour at home to support wealthy rentier clients in the Gulf: the international linkages are financed by appropriating internal resources.

The absence of imperial pay-offs for labour creates a serious political problem: how can the Bush administration sustain a war for global hegemony that cannot rely on economic pay-offs and spinoffs to labour and business to reinforce chauvinist ideological appeals? The answer lies in the militarisation of US culture and society through a mass propaganda blitz. Almost twenty-four hours a day every major media outlet has been engaged in a campaign to

capture the hearts and minds of the American people.

The war, as presented by the state and the media, is defined strictly according to the military censors. Television and radio programmes are organised to focus on military strategies and rationales presented by military officials and strategists of war. News commentators selectively interview rank-and-file soldiers, giving the Pentagon a 'back home, folksy' face. Bombings are described in terms of objects destroyed, according to technical formulas approved by military officials. The issues and prospects of the war are defined by the military and the chief policy-makers. Congressional officials compete with the executive branch in embracing the new military metaphysics. Liberal columnists reinforce the same message: the merits of various techniques of warfare are debated over and against any critical analysis of the rentier classes and global power interests that they serve.

Nowhere is the massive destruction of Iraq, the terror bombing of the population, the enormous economic and human cost to the American people publicly debated or even discussed. More important, the larger political-military issues of the global US power that underlie the war are totally obscured by rhetoric about liberating Kuwait, defending democracy, opposing Hussein. Vague references to a 'New World Order' effectively obscure the role that Washington foresees for itself as the prime beneficiary and dominant force in this 'New Order'.

The 'militarisation' of American society serves to create a culture of citizen obedience to military authority and submissiveness to the imperatives of war. Mass campaigns are encouraged to support the soldiers as a way of blunting criticism of the war makers. The militarisation barrage has even affected sectors of the anti-war opposition; every call to end the war is balanced by 'support' of our soldiers. This misplaced accommodation to the power of state rhetoric replaces an effort to fight the economic system that fails to provide meaningful, productive work at home and forces young people into the armed forces.

The Great Power designs to which soldiers' lives are sacrificed are ignored by sectors of the anti-war movement which accept the rhetoric of US intervention that says that the war is about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and that a military blockade and economic sanctions should be 'given a chance'. This position, sharing as it does the ideological premises that undergird the US projection of power and military intervention, legitimates the bases for future escalation and intervention elsewhere. The differences are 'tactical'—the common ground of intervention is in place. Military politics dominate debates; some argue for continual mass bombing ('to save American lives'), while others advocate a ground war.

This pseudo-debate finds its most perverse expression in the emerging discussion of the ultimate irrationality of the military logic, the discussion of whether and under what conditions nuclear and biological weapons might or might not be used against Iraq (by none other than Leslie Gelb of the *New York Times*).

The saturation of public life with military definitions of reality and the wide swath of political organisations and institutions submerged within that reality are indicative of the powerful ideological resources at the disposal of the state. The high level of state-media co-ordination is also indicative of the potential fragility of support, given the absence of any 'material reinforcement'.

If the Gulf War is primarily about the US re-shaping a New World Order anchored in military supremacy over its market-based competitors, it also involves the protection and cultivation of client regimes whose interests are linked to this global project. The Gulf oil monarchies recycle hundreds of billions of dollars of rentier earnings to US banks. Israel provides overt military support to the US in West Asia and clandestine arms and intelligence to terrorist Third World US client regimes. The United States' defence of the authoritarian Kuwaiti regime and the autocratic Saudi monarchy is in part political payment for their economic support of US intervention in south Asia, South Africa, central America, and elsewhere. More important, these rentier states do not compete with the US economy in global markets; they share the United States' parasitical relation to the producer countries, north and south, east and west. While the US extracts loans and debt payments, the sheikhs receive ground rents.

Israel is in an analogous parasitical position; its economy is heavily based on arms sales, US and, to a lesser degree, European grants and aid (public and private), land appropriated from the Arabs, professionals and skilled labour trained and educated at the expense of communist societies and Western taxpayers. Like the United States, Israel lives off ideological appeals and military capacities that far outrun its economic-technical production. US military definitions of the New World Order resonate with Israeli 'comparative advantages'—particularly as it seeks to carve out a role as a regional power. The Israeli military definition of politics has been refracted through its supporters among the leadership of the all-inclusive Major Jewish Organisation (MJO) in the US. From the beginning of the Gulf conflict, the MJOs have seconded and encouraged every major escalation of the war and have given unconditional support to Bush's policy; they are practically the only major ethno-religious organisation to adopt such an unequivocal position. The influence of the pro-Israel lobby extends to influential newspapers and sectors of the mass media whose writers, publishers, and

newscasters frequently cite or call on Israeli officials for political commentary.

The chauvinist froth pumped out by the mass media and the military rationale elaborated by the elite press to the educated classes tacitly recognises the growing gulf between the classes paying for and fighting the war and the local and overseas promoters and benefactors. The militarisation of cultural life can be temporarily successful only insofar as the 'reality principle' can be avoided. As the costs mount at home and abroad, directly affecting the lives of millions of Americans, and as the unequal benefits and costs become increasingly transparent, a political backlash is likely to occur, pitting pro-war ideologues and the state apparatus against a formidable array of classes.

EUROPE AND JAPAN

The New World Order that Bush and Baker hope to fashion out of the Gulf War is based on the notion of subordinating Europe and Japan to US global ends. Throughout the war, the US news media presented Japan and Germany as ungrateful oil importers benefiting from US military activity without contributing their share of money and military forces. War's morality aside, neither Germany nor Japan has any great interest in or commitment to a military confrontation in the Gulf: their market positions ensure their supply of petrol. Neither country has an interest in diverting economic resources from technological development to a military buildup that has no positive impact on its economic expansion, particularly in international markets. Moreover, a war on behalf of monarchical clients of the US will hardly enhance their influence.

Even during the war, US supremacy over its allies is more appearance than substance. The economic contributions dribble in (and in part take the form of credits and loans to bankrupt US mideast clients), and delivery lags far behind promises. Washington's policy of 'creating facts'—projecting power and then forcing the Europeans and Japanese to support US positions—has temporarily pre-empted the formulation of a common European position, and England has been able to reassert its primary loyalty to the US-led military alliance over and against a common European policy. But this European 'retreat' toward American primacy has no structural basis: Washington has neither the economic capacity, the strategic planning, nor the military will to hold Europe and Japan under its tutelage. Even England's role in the Gulf is less a product of US policy than a function of its own financial interests in the Gulf banks.

If Washington cannot even fully reassert its primacy in the midst of the war, how can it be expected to re-establish a framework for supremacy after the war, when the scramble for contracts, markets, and oil will unleash all the expansionist appetites of Japan and Europe? To accomplish domi-

nance, new rules would have to be established to enable the United States to pursue its vision of a New World Order. In all likelihood these rules would resemble those of the neo-mercantilist world of the 18th century. The US would presumably impose economic charges for its military services. The Seventh Fleet might serve as a kind of 'toll collector', charging fees for oil shipments to Europe and Japan. Of course this is a far-fetched idea, but so is the idea of establishing a New World Order based on US military supremacy over its powerful economic allies. The alternative is even less plausible: the use of military threats to coerce Germany and Japan into falling in line with the command structure of the United States, an idea hardly likely to carry much weight with the US treasury in debt to Japanese banks and US multinationals dependent on European markets.

The Bush-Baker notion of a 'New World Order' based on US military power is really a transplant of the role and practice of 'extractive capitalists' in the United States—the oil and raw material investors in the Third World. Their view of the world is derived from their Third World experiences, where they extend their economic interests through Pentagon and CIA influence to establish favourable client regimes which then open up their countries to exploitation by the United States. In these Third World extractive contexts US military power does serve to consolidate hegemony over client states to open economic opportunities.

George Bush is largely a product of two important strands of 'extractive capital': Texas oil and the CIA. His effort to expand the practices and relations of extractive capitalism in the Third World to a world scale is not only doomed to failure, but reflects the total ineptness of strategic thinking in US policy circles today. Germany and Japan are not about to submit to US dictates on trade policy as Mexico has done; their banks finance the US not vice versa. Nor is the United States likely to find senior military officers in these countries eager to submit to their US counterparts in efforts to undercut national industries.

The unreality of the New World Order pursued by Bush and Baker speaks to a degree of voluntarism born of a blighted vision—one that looks only at the ideological and military role of power and not the economic; one that looks only at US-Third World military ideological success in counter-insurgency and ignores US failures in market competition; one that looks backward to a past era of US dominance and ignores the present and future world of relative equal competitors; one that celebrates ideological victories over communism and ignores the hollowing-out of urban capitalism in America. The blind spots are not minor; they are major determinants of global power and strategic failures.

SCHOOL OF DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

ADMISSIONS 1991

The School of Development Planning and Management offers a two-year postgraduate DIPLOMA IN DEVELOPMENT PLANNING awarded by the University of Poona. This is the first professional diploma of its kind in South Central Asia, where the focus is on development planning and management at the district, block and community levels. In this programme, an interdisciplinary approach is taken incorporating knowledge mainly from economics, geography, management, public administration, systems analysis, social science research techniques, sociology and statistics.

ELIGIBILITY: Applicants must at least be graduates or equivalent with 50% marks in Agriculture, Anthropology, Architecture, Civil Engineering, Commerce, Economics, Geography, Medicine, Management, Political Science, Public Administration, Social Work, Sociology, Statistics and Veterinary Science.

SELECTION: The applicants must appear for an entrance exam for pre-selection, which consists of a written test and a group discussion. Pre-selected candidates will then appear before an interview board for final selection. The entrance exam date (June) and location will be communicated to eligible applicants.

DEPUTATION: Governments, development corporations and voluntary agencies are encouraged to sponsor candidates by meeting all or part of the candidate's expenses.

FINANCIAL AID: Non-sponsored candidates will be considered for scholarships and fee waivers only on merit basis. Interest free study loans are available on a need basis. Besides these, there are merit prizes for all students to compete.

HOW TO APPLY: Application forms along with a prospectus can be obtained until the 15th of May, 1991. The last date for receiving completed application forms is 5th June, 1991. The entrance exam will be held during the second week of June. Classes begin in early July.

For application forms and prospectus write enclosing *crossed postal orders or a bank draft for Rs.40/- in favour of "CDSA, Poona"* to: **Director, School of Development Planning and Management, CDSA, P.B. 843, Deccan Gymkhana, Poona 411 004.** Applications received either late or without the prescribed fee will not be entertained.