

Half Million Americans Abroad to Secure the Empire

Contributed by Roger Burbach
Tuesday, 07 September 2004

Bush declared in his acceptance speech at the Republican convention that he is fighting terrorism abroad "not for pride, not for power," but to protect American lives. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Bush's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are wars of empire.

The Kerry campaign is floundering in part because it buys into Bush's rationale for conflict abroad. Instead of recognizing that the United States is embroiled in an ever-deepening morass in the Gulf because it is acting as a neo-colonial power, Kerry asserts that Bush has bungled the war due to incompetence, mismanagement and arrogance.

The situation can be righted if only the United States involves the United Nations and its European allies in a more astute application of military force.

What is not discussed or recognized is that the occupation of Iraq is rooted in a long history of US imperial exploits and atrocities. The very founding of the modern American empire began with the Open Door policy enunciated in the aftermath of the War of 1898.

Designed to advance US commercial and corporate interests abroad, military force was often used to break open markets that resisted diplomatic and economic pressures.

To take over the Philippines in the first decade of the twentieth century, the United States waged a brutal war against the Filipino independence movement, destroying entire villages and summarily executing captured insurgents.

At least half a million people died while the American Sugar Trust led the corporate takeover by staking out enormous plantation holdings.

The use of indiscriminate air power and the infliction of heavy "collateral damage" has a long history in the annals of the US Empire.

In the late 1920s in Nicaragua a rag tag band of rebels led by Augusto Cesar Sandino waged a guerrilla war against the US marines who occupied the country.

Frustrated in their efforts to track down the rebels in the rural areas, the United States began using airplanes to bomb villages suspected of harboring Sandino supporters.

The US backed ruler, Anastasio Somoza, after negotiating a peace accord with Sandino, had him assassinated, inaugurating a family dictatorship that lasted over four decades.

Marine Corps officer Smedley Butler who led many of the American assaults in these years openly admitted that he was in effect a "racketeer" for Wall Street.

The 1960s and 1970s were particularly brutal decades in Latin America due to US intervention to stop the spread of national liberation movements that threatened US interests throughout the region.

Repressive dictatorial regimes backed by the United States murdered tens of thousands of civilians in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Haiti, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil.

The horrors of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were anticipated in many of these countries as torture chambers were set up, often under the tutelage of the CIA.

Then in the 1980s the United States funded surrogate armies to destabilize nationalist governments in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In rhetoric similar to Bush's claim that he is bringing "freedom" and "democracy" to Iraq, Ronald Reagan called the CIA backed contras who murdered thousands of Nicaraguan peasants "freedom fighters," while the warlords in Afghanistan were likened to "our founding fathers."

The first bold move to secure the US empire in the Middle East and the Gulf States occurred in 1953 when the CIA staged a coup against the democratically elected government of Mohammed Mossadegh after he moved to nationalize the Iranian oil fields.

President Eisenhower placed the autocratic Shah of Iran in power. For the next quarter century Republican and Democratic administrations viewed the Shah as one of the most dependable leaders in the region.

In 1978 the Shah fell in a popular uprising led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Vehemently anti-American, the new Islamic government seized foreign oil interests and took US embassy personnel hostage.

In his State of the Union address in January 1980, Carter proclaimed: "An attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

The Carter Doctrine, as it became known, made it clear the United States would use military power in the Gulf to secure and maintain the oil resources needed to turn the wheels of empire.

This policy explains the US sale of heavy weaponry to Saddam Hussein in the early 1980s when war broke out between Iraq and Iran.

Donald Rumsfeld, Reagan's special envoy at the time, made several visits to Baghdad to normalize diplomatic relations. Despite Saddam's use of chemical weapons against Iran and the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, the United States continued to back Iraq.

Emboldened by these signs of support for his regime, Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990. The first Bush administration however quickly came to view the invasion as a threat to US supremacy in the region and launched the first Gulf War.

Bill Clinton pursued a similar policy of belligerence towards Iraq, imposing crippling economic sanctions, undertaking the most sustained bombing campaign since the Vietnam war, and making "regime change" in Iraq official US policy.

Madeline Albright, the US ambassador to the United Nations in 1996, when asked if she thought the sanctions were justified in light of a UN report estimating that more than 500,000 children had died because of a lack of adequate

nutrition and medical care, replied:

"I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it."

To impose its imperial fiat on the world the United States has over 730 military bases in 132 countries. The military deploys over half a million soldiers, spies, technicians, teachers, dependents and civilian contractors abroad.

Thirteen carrier task forces ply the oceans, constituting floating military bases. Of the money spent on foreign affairs, 93 percent goes through the Pentagon while the State Department spends the remainder.

But this military complex is overstretched. Boggled down in Iraq, the American empire is facing its most severe crisis since the Vietnam War. It is unable to carry out the regime change it wants in Iran, North Korea and Syria.

In its historic backyard, Latin America, the populist government of Hugo Chavez thwarted a US backed coup in 2002, and has just won a recall election that will insure the continuance of Chavez' independent foreign policy stance and the redistribution of the country's oil revenues on behalf of the poor.

In Argentina, President Nestor Kirchner is defying the International Monetary Fund, refusing to fully reimburse creditors who took advantage of the country in the 1990's during the halcyon days of the "free market."

And under Luis Inacio "Lula" da Siliva, Brazil is challenging US economic prerogatives in the region while criticizing the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

This is the time for the anti-war movement in the United States to question the foundations of the US imperial order. The advocates of empire are the true "dead enders."

Violence, extremism and terrorism will only deepen as long as the occupation of Iraq continues. The sooner the United States is compelled to curtail its imperial ambitions, the more likely it is that both the Iraqi and the American people will be able to live in a more harmonious and peaceful world.

Roger Burbach and Jim Tarbell are the authors of "Imperial Overstretch: George W. Bush and the Hubris of Empire." To order the book see: www.globalalternatives.org.