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USA

# Year Zero: twelve months of the "war on terrorism"

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**On February 26, 1993 Islamist terrorists detonated a bomb in an underground car park of the New York Twin Towers, resulting in six deaths and hundreds of injuries. The bombers watched from across the Hudson River, but the buildings did not collapse as they had hoped.**

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Writing about this event one year before September 11, Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University, commented: "If that attack had had its intended effect the results would have been calamitous, not just for the city of New York, but for the United States as a whole." But it would not, argued Rogers, have led the United States to any fundamental rethink of its relations with the third world. "A more likely result would have been a massive and violent military reaction against any groups anywhere in the Middle East thought to have had even the slightest connection with the attack." [1]

And so it turned out. But the US military response to the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had much more behind it than imperial hubris - although there was plenty of that. Bush and the recycled Reaganite team around him launched a military-political offensive whose central aim was to forcefully extend the hegemony of US capitalism and the American state worldwide, while dealing sharp blows against all the Bush administration's perceived enemies and rivals: centrally, third world liberation movements, the global justice movement, domestic political rivals and America's political-economic rival states in Europe. Any account of the year since September 11 must answer the question: to what extent has this offensive succeeded? And what does this show us about the character of the Bush administration, its geopolitical thinking, and its long-term aims?

The war on terrorism, we should remember, was originally launched under the banner of capturing and punishing the perpetrators of the attack. At a military level the war on Afghanistan, launched on 5 October, seemed to result in an overwhelming victory with minimal casualties - and it could hardly have been otherwise, given the vast quantities of firepower used and total US air superiority. 'Regime change' has indeed been achieved in Afghanistan, although the Taliban has been replaced with a government whose writ hardly runs outside Kabul, as the country reverts to ethnic warfare and control by regional warlords. The United States doesn't give a fig about that and has left 'nation building' to the Europeans. The collapse of the Taliban in Kabul in December 2001 led to a celebration of 'victory' by Bush and his international supporters, but of course judged by the yardstick of actually combating terrorism - i.e. actually eliminating Bin Laden, dismantling al-Qaida, or addressing the real causes of terrorism - it was a failure. If that doesn't unduly bother the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz-Rice team, then that's because for them terrorism of the al-Qaida variety is a small problem and defeating it is an entirely secondary objective.

## â€˜Axis of Evil'

December 2001 also saw the first significant public opposition in Europe to US actions which went beyond the anti-war movement and the left; this was centred on a barrage of criticism of the US treatment of Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Rumsfeld's curt dismissal of the Geneva Convention, and the widespread suspicion among European governments that prisoners were being tortured.

Relations with the European states really hit the fan with Bush's January 2002 'axis of evil' State of the Union speech. This speech represents the central public programmatic declaration of the objectives of the United States. As Peter Gowan points out, "The speech was designed to commit all the forces domestically and internationally grouped in Bush's coalition against terrorism to an entirely new set of strategic objectives, namely, to commit them to support the

right of the US to take pre-emptive military action to attack and overthrow the regimes of Iraq, Iran and North Korea and other states deemed to be hostile to the United States and alleged by it to be developing weapons of mass destruction.... The speech also made it patently clear that the Bush administration was committing itself to a military-political drive against a wide range of Muslim and Arab forces in the Middle East, mainly linked together not by al-Qaida but by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Four of the five 'terrorist' organisations he identified were linked to that conflict and so were two of the three states - Iran and Iraq. The third state, North Korea, was also linked to Iran through the fact it was allegedly selling Iran medium range missiles. Iran in turn is singled out for its support to Hizbollah and for its alleged supply of arms to the Palestinian authority". [2]

Bush threw down a challenge to all those European states that might hesitate at this incredible new doctrine of pre-emptive military strikes, "Some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: if they do not act, America will."

The 'Axis of Evil' speech takes us to the heart of what is new in the objectives and methods of the Bush team, as opposed to previous administrations. The key members of Bush's team, nearly all of whom served under Reagan, [3] are committed to the idea that the political conditions have been created for the widespread use of military force, and that military force can be easily translated into reinforced American political and economic dominance worldwide. In caricatured accounts of the US approach, unthinking militarism is assumed as a constant, but this is not the case. For example, former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, hardly a bleeding-heart liberal, downplays the role of US military force in his 1997 international relations classic *The Grand Chessboard*. [4] Brzezinski argues "...America is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. This limits the use of America's power, especially its capacity for military intimidation. Never before has a populist democracy (sic) attained international domination. But the pursuit of power is not a goal that commands public passion, except in conditions of sudden threat or challenge to the public's sense of domestic well-being. The economic self-denial (that is, defence spending) and human sacrifice (casualties even among professional soldiers) required in the effort are uncongenial to democratic instincts. Democracy is inimical to imperial mobilization." [5]

In the era of the Axis of Evil, this seems like an argument from a bygone age. Brzezinski could of course argue that his approach couldn't possibly factor in an event like September 11, which is precisely the "sudden threat or challenge" that could create an alternative scenario.

Nonetheless, Brzezinski's general approach is to stress that US hegemony depends on a bundle of advantages, of which (especially latent) military might is just one factor. These include economic dominance, technological supremacy, the attractiveness of the US political model, the magnetic attraction - especially for the young - of US popular culture, military power (vital control of the oceans) and overall the demonstrable success and attractiveness of the US 'society model', which especially mobilises the imaginations of the most dynamic, creative and ambitious people worldwide. [6] The actual use of US military power will be, for Brzezinski, a declining factor in the post-Soviet world. On the contrary "manoeuvre, diplomacy, coalition building, co-optation, and the very deliberate deployment of one's political assets have become the key ingredients of the successful exercise of geo-strategic power..." [7] Bush's new warriors have thrown such ideas in the dustbin with a resounding clang.

## World dominance objectives

All participants in debates among US defence intellectuals agree that the key to US hegemony is its capacity to dominate 'Eurasia' - the landmass of Europe and Asia, including the Middle East to the south, China and Japan as the pivots of the east, and Western Europe constituting the opposite edge. This area holds the vast majority of the world's economic, natural and population resources and hugely outweighs the Americas in every field. America's dominance relies on the fact that the US outguns every single potential Eurasian competitor, and political disunity

amongst potential Eurasian alliances (so far) hobbles anti-US competition. What emphases do the Bush team now put on military-political objectives to keep Eurasia subjugated?

First, the view held by Brzezinski and others that Western Europe remains under US tutelage is treated with extreme suspicion. Second, traditional views of what constitutes the strategic core of Eurasia have shifted dramatically eastwards, with much more emphasis being placed on central and east Asia. Third, the vital economic and strategic importance of the Middle East is being reaffirmed, including of course the perception that the main challengers to US dominance in that region are the Europeans.

It is this context that the new US military deployments have to be understood. Bush's team includes a large number of east Asia experts and they have no doubt where the biggest single potential future threat to United States capitalism lies: China. New US military bases in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan complement the increased US commitment to South Korea and Taiwan, and of course the sending of 10,000 troops to the Philippines are aimed at reinforcing the US's Asian presence and surrounding China, hoping to disrupt future attempts by China to make itself the leader of any east Asian political alliances.

US policy in the Middle East, especially uncritical support for Sharon's permanent war against the Palestinians, the drive to launch a war to unseat Saddam in Iraq, and increased threats against Iran serve to disrupt European political influence in the regions, reducing EU initiatives on Palestine to a pathetic farce of impotent pleading and throwing a spanner in the works (hopefully) of European economic links with Iraq and Iran.

On top of this Bush has scored a major success in using the war on terrorism to threaten and bribe the sinister Putin regime in Russia, giving US support for the war in Chechnya and promises of future political and economic benefits, in exchange for the abandonment of Russian objections to star wars and the expansion of NATO eastwards. This represents a total capsizing of expectations of Russian resistance to US European military, political and economic objectives.

## Reactionary effects worldwide

In some countries the US war on terror has been looked on with bemusement, as a typical excess of Yankee crudity, but one having not much domestic significance for either right or left. The failure of most parts of the French political spectrum to get particularly animated by the war is a case in point. However the truth is that the Bush offensive has tended to have the effect of strengthening reactionary and rightwing forces everywhere, and especially those which have openly attached themselves to US aims and objectives. These reactionary effects are manifold and only a few are highlighted here:-

US allies engaged in counter-revolutionary wars have been given the green light to go on the offensive, notably in the Middle East, Colombia and the Philippines. In Colombia ex-president Pastrana relaunched the war against the left-wing FARC guerrillas, and he has been succeeded by the even more right wing Uribe Velez, a perfect representative of neo-liberal warmongering, who will pursue this war with vast amounts of American aid and covert special forces backup. In the Philippines the dispatch of 10,000 US 'advisors' has as a central objective the re-establishment of a major US presence in that country; but it will also fuel armed actions against Islamist rebels.

The major victims of counter-revolutionary war have of course been the Palestinians, with the traditional State Department round of peace negotiations sacrificed to total support for Israel.

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The war on terrorism has deepened the hold of racism and xenophobia, particularly in Western Europe. Making Bin Laden public enemy number one, and the fact that the enemy is portrayed as mainly Islamic, has strengthened popular stereotypes which go along the lines of 'Muslim=Asylum Seeker=Criminal=Terrorist'. A recent survey in Italy showed 40% of people saying immigrants were a threat to public order and safety, and this in a country which is mainly a transit point for asylum seekers, not their final destination. Xenophobic reaction had obvious negative consequences in the success of the Pim Fortuyn list in the Netherlands, the score of Le Pen in the French presidentials, minor successes for the British National Party and indeed in the near total anti-asylum seeker consensus in the British media and official politics.

A potential, but not yet hardened, pro-US axis has emerged in Europe around the most right wing governmental leaders, notably Berlusconi in Italy, Aznar in Spain and Blair in Britain. The pro-US tilt of their governments is much more marked than any in Paris or Berlin. Of course all the governments concerned are committed to the neo-liberal model, but the US posture has the effect of strengthening the most aggressively right wing of them, those at the cutting edge of trying to force back workers' rights and conditions.

The most significant reactionary effects of course have been within the United States itself. We should remember that a mammoth global justice demonstration was planned in Washington for the beginning of October 2001, and this was immediately scuttled by the September 11 attack. The US global justice movement, while not dead, has had difficulty raising its head in similarly significant numbers since. What followed September 11 was a reactionary mobilisation on a scale not seen since the darkest days of McCarthyism and the Korean war in the early 1950s. It is difficult to imagine the scale of this from the outside; the wave of nationalist patriotism, whipped up with the participation of leading public figures from every walk of life - politicians, media personalities, film and sports stars, rock musicians and church leaders - was very difficult to oppose. Gradually dissident voices have emerged, but just as in the days of the 1950s witch-hunts, public figures know that they will be vilified and stepping out of line will wreck their careers. The ability of the US radical movement to break out of this situation will be a decisive element in whether the Bush offensive is successful.

On top of the surfeit of imperialist violence and the reactionary offensive has been the war on human and civil rights. Numerous instances of this could be quoted, but perhaps the most symbolic have been in the United States itself. Nearly one year on, hundreds of people are still detained without trial and the whereabouts of many is unknown. Not content with ditching the Geneva convention and resorting to torture in Guantanamo, the US now abrogates to itself the right to arrest, imprison without trial, torture or otherwise dispose of anyone in the world it suspects of involvement with what it defines as terrorism.

## Barriers to US success

What are the barriers to total US success in this enterprise of recasting world politics through the use and threat of military violence? In my view the fundamental dilemma can be explained like this: in attempting to take a spectacular initiative which hits at so many rivals simultaneously, the Bush administration of necessity deepens the antagonism of an array of governmental and non-governmental forces worldwide, which separately and in alliance can defeat the whole enterprise. For the other side of the coin has to be seen; if the whole thing collapses in fiasco, the negative consequences for US capitalism will be on the scale of - and probably much bigger - than its defeat in Vietnam. It is a big political mistake in this crucial period to overemphasise the efficacy of US military power or underestimate the potential of opposition.

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The first barrier to success, and a gigantic one, is the spectacular corporate crisis and stock market collapse in the United States itself. This is one more stage in the unravelling of the 'dot.com boom', a massive crisis of

over-accumulation of capital, which started with the financial blow-outs in Asia in 1997 and Russia in 1998. The stock market has been going down for more than two years and no one can say if the end is in sight. Crucial to the ideological effects of this are the realisation by millions that at the centre of the operations of finance capital is fraud (whether it is illegal fraud or not is besides the point). Millions in the US have been defrauded of their savings or will see the value of their pensions disappear or collapse. Assumptions of the attractiveness of the US 'society model' are going to be sorely tested by these events. This will be compounded by the close links of many at the top of the Bush administration with big business; this is a constant in the US politics, but the personal business history of Bush and Cheney is becoming, to say the least, embarrassing. When Bush says "The American people could lose faith in our free enterprise system", something serious is happening. Renewed energy in trying to get the war on Iraq underway could well be linked to Republican fears of being punished for the economic disarray in the November mid-term elections. For while the US Democrats have largely supported the war on terrorism, they have been quick to pick up the theme of corporate corruption.

The second danger for the Bush team lies in the response to an attack on Iraq by its European 'allies'. On the one hand, this problem is probably made more manageable by right-wing victories in European elections. But the imponderable is the extent of anti-war mobilisations and public sentiment. In this context, we have to note that the fear of many that the global justice movement would collapse in the face of the US anti-terrorist offensive has not been realised. On the contrary: the global justice movement helped build, and indeed merged with, an anti-war movement on a scale not seen since Vietnam.

Preparations for the Iraq War 2 are causing important friction with European governments. Bush's new warriors are correct in doubting previous orthodoxies about the political subordination of Europe. The reason for this is ironic. As outlined at length in an important recent article by Peter Gowan, [\[8\]](#) the collapse of the Soviet Union both immensely increased the relative strength of the United States and simultaneously undermined the structures of its political domination of Europe, i.e. NATO as a response to the Soviet threat.

Since September 11 there have been giant global justice and anti-war mobilisations, most notably the success of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre and the monster 600,000-strong Barcelona demonstration. The centres of the anti-war movement during the Afghanistan attack were Italy and Britain. Post-September 11 crowing in the North American and British right-wing press that the global justice movement was finished has been repudiated by events. The scene is being set for an enormous outpouring of anti-war sentiment if Iraq is savaged again. As we noted above, only in the United States has the global justice movement been decisively set back.

Finally, the war on terrorism takes places - and deepens - international instability which can have unpredictable consequences. For example, terrible problems for the US have been caused by the conflict between India and Pakistan, which caused near panic in Washington about the prospect of a nuclear war and diverted huge resources to finding a (temporary) solution.

Global instability and turmoil, undermining US credibility and the neo-liberal model, have in the past year particularly been centred in Latin America, with political turmoil in Paraguay, the collapse of the Argentine economy, a repeat performance in Uruguay and Brazil waiting in the wings. However, the huge mobilizations and self-organization of the Argentine masses has failed to generate a popular alternative at the level of government, a serious challenge by the left for power. The reason for this is hardly a mystery for anyone even slightly acquainted with Marxist theories of capitalist crisis and mass politics - the absence of any political force with a modicum of political vision and revolutionary sentiment which has a real mass base and can lead the divergent instances of popular power and mobilization towards a unified quest to conquer political power.

## A new stage: October war?

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Almost certainly detailed plans and a preliminary schedule for the Iraq war have been drawn up by the US in concert with the British government. The international media is rife with rumours that the bombs will start falling again in October, and this date has the logic that it will be in the wake of the national commemorations for September 11 in which the war against terrorism will be re-affirmed and national unity of purpose (hopefully) rekindled; and it will be before the November mid-term elections for a third of the seats in the House and Senate, hopefully boosting Bush's flagging ratings.

In fact Bush, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and the rest have now talked themselves into a position where not to have a war to replace Saddam would be seen as a major defeat, and in effect undermine the credibility of the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes against rogue states. The war on terrorism depends on the Iraq criterion. If it can't even get rid of Saddam Hussein after all this huffing and puffing, then it is next to useless.

At the time of writing (early August) the US is close to rejecting its own weapons inspectors as an irrelevance, sensing that Saddam might even accept them back - a sure sign of US determination to go to war, if necessary without even bothering to construct a half-believable case about 'weapons of mass destruction'. Rumours, probably spread by Downing Street, that Tony Blair publicly supports war, while in secret he is trying to dissuade George Bush, are probably irrelevant, even in the unlikely event they are true. Mr Blair has his uses for Bush, but determining US strategy is not one of them.

We now face the prospect of another major outburst of imperialist violence, tens of thousands more deaths and another outburst of political reaction to accompany it. What Bush and his advisors offer us is not a decisive war to defeat the 'axis of evil', but a new paradigm of how the American empire is to keep its dominance from now on: permanent war. Defeating this barbaric prospect means maximising the anti-war mobilisation worldwide.

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[1] Losing Control, Paul Rogers, Pluto Press 2000, p 118.

[2] Western Europe in the Face of the Bush campaign, Peter Gowan, Labour Focus on Eastern Europe, issue 71 pp 6-7.

[3] Especially the 'military men': Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld and Cheney. In the US, contrary to popular myth, the military is subordinate to politics and business, and has been ever since World War 2 showed that the military couldn't organize a war and had to be bailed out by business people and administrators who had expertise in logistics, planning and procurement. Defence intellectuals rarely are serving officers, and often have stronger links with academia or business.

[4] Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard, Basic Books, 1997.

[5] Brzezinski, op cit pp 35-6.

[6] Brzezinski, op cit pp 25-7

[7] Brzezinski, op cit p 36

[8] Gowan, op cit.