A new colonial "age of empire"?

by Lance Selfa

AFTER SPENDING decades at the bottom of history's dustbin, colonialism is back. The political right, feeling emboldened to offer up its most hoary proposals to the rampaging Bush administration, is making the case for a U.S.-run world empire. "Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets," Max Boot, editorial features editor for the Wall Street Journal, wrote in the Weekly Standard a week after Bush's war in Afghanistan began last October. National Review editor Richard Lowry joined the pro-imperial chorus with a call to establish a U.S.-sponsored "protectorate" over Iraq after U.S. troops oust Saddam Hussein's regime. Lowry continued, "The entire effort would represent a return to an enlightened paternalism toward the Third World, premised on the idea that the Arabs have failed miserably at self-governance and need to start anew."

Another member of the neo-conservative opinion-making cabal, Sebastian Mallaby, took to the more respectable pages of Foreign Affairs to urge the U.S. to embrace empire:

Empires are not always planned. The original American colonies began as the unintended byproduct of British religious strife. The British political class was not so sure it wanted to rule India, but commercial interests dragged it there anyway. The United States today will be an even more reluctant imperialist. But a new imperial moment has arrived, and by virtue of its power America is bound to play the leading role. The question is not whether the United States will seek to fill the void created by the demise of European empires but whether it will acknowledge that this is what it is doing. Only if Washington acknowledges this task will its response be coherent. 1

Boot's call for a new American empire of "enlightened foreign administration" sounds warm and fuzzy compared to the likes of Paul Johnson. A British conservative who has found in the U.S. neocon press a friendly forum for his pro-imperialist ranting, Johnson has long advocated a return to colonialism. Following the U.S. invasion of Somalia in 1992, he published a then-controversial (and most thought wacky) article called "Colonialism's Back: And Not a Moment Too Soon") in the New York Times Magazine. "The basic problem is obvious but is never publicly admitted: some states are not yet fit to govern themselves. There is a moral issue here: The civilized world has a mission to go out to these desperate places and govern."2

No doubt much of this pro-colonialist posturing reflects the right-wing hubris to which the post-September 11 political climate gave rise. But it's clear that at least some of these calls for a new colonialism are finding their way into the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office. The Bush administration has made no secret of its desire to overthrow the Iraqi government—and, possibly, other governments as well. U.S. troops are already occupying Afghanistan, providing a bodyguard for the U.S.-backed puppet government they installed. Obviously, the U.S. government has no problem overriding the sovereignty of other nations and subjecting them to its rule. This new colonialism supplies an ideological justification for the "with us or with the terrorists" Bush Doctrine.

New Colonial thinking has gone even farther in Tony Blair's Foreign Office. Former Blair adviser Robert Cooper's "The Post Modern State," an essay in a collection modestly titled Reordering the World: The Long Term Implications of September 11th, called for a "new imperialism." Couched in the rhetoric of liberal United Nations-speak and academic political science, Cooper reveals his plans for an imperialism "acceptable to a world of human rights and cosmopolitan values. We can already discern its outline: an imperialism which, like all imperialism, aims to bring order and organization but which rests today on the voluntary principle." Cooper distinguishes between the "postmodern world," including the European Union, Canada, Japan and possibly the U.S., and the pre-modern world of "failed states" whose territory can become bases for "drug, crime and terrorist" syndicates. Postmodern states cooperate with each other. They don't go to war with each other. But they have the right to "revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era—force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who still live in the nineteenth century world of
every state for itself." (So much for "voluntary" imperialism!) Cooper holds up as examples of "voluntary imperialism" the protectorates running Kosovo and Bosnia today. Somehow, he neglects to mention that NATO wars imposed both of these "voluntary" protectorates.3

Cooper’s "new" thinking is no mere academic exercise. As Blair and Britain play loyal lapdog to Washington’s warmakers, the prospect for an aggressive Anglo-American imperialism grows. The two countries already stand virtually alone in their support for pummeling Iraq. "The prospect looms of Blair’s passionate moralism being seduced into making common cause with Bush’s aggressive pragmatism, in pursuit of a new doctrine of justifiable intervention which has not been discussed anywhere outside these two countries," wrote an alarmed Hugo Young.4

Back to the 19th Century?

As Western rulers seriously discuss a "new imperialism" and a "return to colonialism," it’s worth considering just what they propose to revive. German academic Jürgen Osterhammel’s short study Colonialism defines its subject as:

…a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convince of their own superiority and of the ordained mandate to rule."5

Colonialism and empire-building has a long and infamous history. In the 3rd century, Roman Empire ruled virtually all of modern-day Europe, North Africa and the Middle East with a legion of 300,000 soldiers. The Ching Dynasty and the Mongol Empire controlled the lives of millions and ruled vast land masses in their heydays. Modern colonialism accompanied the rise of capitalism in the 16th century when Spain and Portugal established their dominion over large parts of America. England implanted its first colonies in Ireland and America in the 17th century. The international slave trade brought all the major imperial powers into the business of exploiting and oppressing millions of non-Europeans. Today’s new imperialists take inspiration from the period encompassing the last quarter of the 19th century through the end of the First World War, the period British historian Eric Hobsbawm called "The Age of Empire." The rapid subjugation to European powers of huge parts of the world in a scramble for colonies set this period aside from all others that came before it. In 1876, Africans controlled almost 90 percent of African territory. By 1900, Europeans controlled 90 percent of African territory. During the same period, European control of Polynesia increased from 56.8 percent to 98.9 percent. As the Russian revolutionary Lenin explained the phenomenon, "The characteristic feature of this period is the final partition of the globe—not in the sense that a new partition is impossible… but in the sense that the colonial policy of the capitalist countries has completed the seizure of unoccupied territories on our planet. For the first time, the world is completely shared out, so that in the future only re-division is possible." For Lenin and his generation of revolutionary Marxists, the scramble for colonies stemmed from the drive of the leading capitalist powers for access to markets and raw materials and for greater investment opportunities. As "trade followed the flag," competition for colonies and markets spilled over into military competition and conflict. Lenin thus described the First World War of 1914-1918 as "a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence of finance capital." 6 Lenin and the revolutionary socialists who stood firm against their own governments’ entry into the First World War called for freedom to the colonies. Lenin wrote:

"The proletariat must demand freedom of political separation for the colonies and nations oppressed by "their own" nation. Otherwise, the internationalism of the proletariat would be nothing but empty words. ..Socialists must not only demand the unconditional and immediate liberation of the colonies without compensation… they must also render determined support to the more revolutionary elements in the bourgeois-democratic movements for national liberation in these countries and assist their uprising.7

The rich and pioneering Marxist writings on imperialism and the right of nations to self-determination are essential reading. But they are beyond the scope of this essay.8 The important point here is the absolute opposition to colonialism that revolutionary socialists took during the "age of empire." We should keep this attitude of contempt for
colonialism in mind when we read today's apologists for colonialism rewrite its history. Parroting the apologists for colonialism in its heyday, today's new imperialists would have us believe that 19th century colonialism brought peace and social development to the colonies. They accept at face value the claims of European colonialists that a mission to "uplift the backward races"—what imperialist poet Rudyard Kipling called "the white man's burden"—motivated them.

The experience of colonialism was anything but benign. In the 1880s, when Belgian King Leopold II seized Congo—a country 77 times the size of his own—he won a reputation in Europe as a great humanitarian. He decreed the end of the slave trade in the territory and declared his intention to bring "civilization" to the indigenous people. Meanwhile, the king's armies were impressing thousands of Congolese into forced labor (slavery by any other name) on rubber plantations. The Belgians subjected the indigenous people to the most horrific tortures and brutalities, ultimately driving down the region's population by 10 million.9

The imperial powers destroyed the societies they conquered. Because they reorganized the colonial economies solely to serve the "mother country's" capitalists, development of colonial economies was distorted. Britain deliberately flooded the Indian market with factory goods from Britain's factories, destroying Indian handicraft industries like metalworking and cloth production. At the same time, British imposition of cash relations and huge land taxes on the Indian peasantry led to famines or food shortages in 20 of the 49 years between 1860 and 1908. Before conquest, India suffered a famine only once every 50 years. British authorities, devotees to Malthusianism, let tens of millions starve to death rather than provide them with relief that might dull their work ethic. Lord Salisbury, British secretary of state for India, summed up British policy pithily when he said, "India must be bled."10 In the last quarter of the 19th century, as many as 61 million people perished from famines in India, China and Brazil whose root causes lay not in weather patterns, but in the colonial reengineering of their societies. "What seemed from a metropolitan perspective the nineteenth century's final blaze of imperial glory was, from an Asian and African viewpoint, only the hideous light of a giant funeral pyre."11

Conquest and maintenance of colonial rule entailed mass slaughter (what Kipling called "savage wars of peace"). In a forerunner of today's U.S.-led "casualty free" wars, British troops with automatic weapons lost 49 soldiers while killing 11,000 Sudanese in the 1898 battle of Omdurman. Germany organized genocide against the Herero and Nama peoples of South West Africa (today's Namibia) in 1904-1907, purposely setting out to exterminate them. The 1898-1902 U.S. war to subjugate the Philippines slaughtered more than 1 million people. U.S. forces fought Filipino guerrillas and employed all the techniques of "pacification" later used in Vietnam: concentration camps, crop destruction, scorched earth and biological warfare. "They never rebel in Luzon anymore," said a U.S. congressman, "because there isn't anybody left to rebel."xii

What of colonial education and social reforms, the colonialists' best advertisements for their self-proclaimed civilizing mission? Perhaps it goes without saying that colonial education systems aimed only to train a small elite in the colonial populations for work in the colonial bureaucracy. The colonizers viewed the majority of the colonized population as cheap labor for whom literacy skills were a luxury. Colonial regimes in early 20th century Africa spent less than 5 percent of tax receipts on education. In Portugal's African colonies, African children bore only a 1 in 100 chance of receiving schooling past the 3rd grade. The Belgian government and the Catholic Church that controlled education in Congo did not believe that Congolese had the capacity to handle education beyond the primary level. Only in 1948 did a Belgian commission advise creating high schools for Africans. On the eve of Congo's independence in 1960, there were only 16 Congolese high school graduates out of a population of 13 million!13

Colonialism, like the slave trade that it ushered in, was one of the great crimes against humanity in history. Anyone committed to democracy, equality, and freedom should celebrate the defeat of colonialism, not mourn its passing. In fact, the death of colonialism and the creation of independent nations in Africa, Asia and most recently in Central and Eastern Europe is one of the 20th century's greatest achievements.

Decolonization: political and ideological retreat

As it turned out, the period of the "new imperialism" notched colonialism's high water mark. As the classical Marxists contended, the imperialist carve-up of the globe opened the way for military conflict between the great powers. In the
aftermath of both World Wars, colonial empires collapsed—and fell to national liberation movements. After the Second World War, "Western capitalism entered a phase of unprecedented growth at the same time as it dismantled its different empires. ... decolonization was conceded because the metropolitan powers were less dependent upon their colonies, not more. The price of retaining empire steadily exceeded the returns on empire."14

Of course, the end of colonialism didn't mean the end of imperialism. The world powers relied on "free trade," multinational corporations and foreign direct investment to exploit the resources and labor power of the Third World of independent states. This was especially the case with the U.S., which—despite its late 1800s/early 1900s seizure of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines and Guam—had always opted for the more indirect "neo-colonial" model of domination than the European powers. In this model, the U.S. eschewed direct political administration over a far-flung empire of colonies in favor of penetrating their economies and societies with U.S. trade and investment. Instead of governing through U.S. pro-consuls and large American garrisons, the U.S. relied on local dictators and militaries to uphold its interests. No one doubted that postwar Latin America was the neo-colonial "backyard" of the U.S., even though most of its countries maintained their formal political independence won from Spain in the 1800s.15

The post Second World War retreat of colonialism set its ideological defenders on the run. Racism and imperialism found their most hideous manifestations in the Third Reich and the Japan-ruled "Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere." It became impossible to extoll the virtues of colonialism, especially for those who claimed to fight the Second World War for democracy and the Four Freedoms. More importantly, the upsurge of national liberation movements (in India, Indonesia, Congo, Ghana, etc.) demonstrated to elite opinion that Third World people were not merely objects of history, but history makers. Frank Furedi shows how these factors forced colonialism’s defenders to rewrite history by "minimizing the destructive role of imperialism." As more former colonies won their independence, the ideological target shifted. Denunciations of newly independent states as "pro-Soviet", corrupt, ungovernable and descriptions of leading nationalists as a succession of "new Hitlers" (from Nasser to Saddam Hussein) replaced futile attempts to defend colonialism. As Furedi explained, "the suggestion seemed to be that the credibility of the West depended on discrediting the societies of the Third World. The underlying conviction was that through criminalizing the Third World the West could morally rehabilitate itself."16

If so many of the countries that gained their independence in the last half-century suffer mass poverty, social breakdown and dictatorial government, it’s not because they "weren’t ready" for independence. It’s because they exist in a world economic order rigged against them from the start. The distorting impacts of hundreds of years of colonialism on their economic, social and educational systems can’t be ignored. The continued dependence of a large number of underdeveloped countries on commodity exports make them vulnerable to collapsing world market prices. The latter-day "dept cops" of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank squeeze billions from desperately poor countries to line the coffers of the world’s leading bankers. And imperialist maneuvering through the Cold War and beyond have turned whole countries into exhibit halls for the global arms bazaar.

The current Western obsession with "failed states" reflects an imperialist attempt to absolve itself from creating these disasters. Somalia fell into lawlessness after U.S.-backed Siad Barre dictatorship collapsed in 1989. For two decades before, the rival Cold War superpowers had treated the country as a political football. They fueled its war with Ethiopia, and armed Siad Barre as his regime killed 12 percent of the population and forced almost one-quarter of its population into exile. Afghanistan’s state and society collapsed after more than 20 years of USSR military occupation, U.S.-backed "jihad," and civil war. Massive debt to the International Monetary Fund and Western banks impelled the 1980s economic crisis that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and its descent into nationalist barbarism. Bangkok Post journalist Martin Khor correctly explains the blame-the-victim theory of "failed states":

True, a large part of the blame must be placed on the political, commercial and intellectual elites of these countries. But the failure can also be attributed to factors largely beyond the countries’ control, such as falling commodity export prices, the debt burden and inadequate aid and technology transfer. The expanded theory of the ‘failed state’ not only puts the blame onto the country concerted, but opens the way to political and even military intervention in many countries—countries that are suspected to sponsor or tolerate ‘terrorism,’ and countries that are unable to development sufficiently or in a way that would prevent the conditions for ‘terrorism.’17
Humanitarian Intervention: The New White Man’s Burden

Today U.S. officials speak openly and unapologetically about intervening in countries around the world. This is quite a shift from the early 1970s, when the U.S. defeat in Vietnam made politicians and generals reluctant to commit U.S. forces to military adventures around the world. Hawks in the U.S. military establishment mounted a decades-long drive to reestablish militarism and to overcome the Vietnam syndrome. During the Cold War, the traditional rationale of fighting “communism” in Nicaragua or Afghanistan justified U.S. intervention. As the Cold War ended, another rationale emerged—policing the “New World Order” against so-called “rogue states.” The Gulf War against Iraq in 1991 provided the proving ground for this new imperialist ideology. But perhaps no rationale for imperialist intervention has been more successful than the ideology of “humanitarian intervention.” The rise of “humanitarian intervention” coincided with the end of the Cold War, when unparalleled U.S. military power was seeking new justifications for its use.

The last Bush administration and its Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell staked out this ideological territory with Operation Restore Hope, the euphemistic title for their 1992 invasion of Somalia. But what Poppa Bush and Powell started haltingly, liberals turned into a full-fledged case for Western intervention to prevent humanitarian disasters in a number of countries—from Somalia to Haiti to the Balkans. With the threat of military intervention escalating into superpower confrontation removed, the U.S. felt less constrained about intervening in countries across the world. The Clinton administration dispatched U.S. troops into hostile situations more than the previous three U.S. administrations combined. And the political instability left over from the collapse of the bipolar Cold War world invited a huge expansion of United Nations sponsored “peacekeeping,” with nearly 40 such operations authorized in the 1990s alone. This new interventionism also coincided with the rise to power in the main Western countries of the center-left governments (e.g., Clinton, Blair, Schröder) adept at using moralistic rhetoric, laced with references to human rights, to cloak their actions.

Another key factor was the increased influence of non-governmental organizations, increasingly collaborating with leading Western governments, to drum up support for intervention on the grounds that “something must be done” to help civilians in crisis spots. The test case for this kind of intervention was the U.S.-led Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1992. Two leading human rights advocates described the close relationship that developed between famine-relief NGOs and the Pentagon:

The extremely close relations between the United States military and some of the United States relief agencies, particularly CARE and the Los Angeles-based International Medical Corps, has worried Somalis and a number of foreign observers. During the two decades when Mohammed Siad Barre laid Somalia to waste, the relief groups kept silent, arguing they could not “meddle” in politics. Now, without consulting Somalis, they prompted and then welcomed a foreign invasion. Many Somalis are asking whether the American relief agencies are the representatives of the “humanitarian international,” or the vanguard of the United States military.18

Today, the Somalia invasion, memorialized in the film “Black Hawk Down,” is remembered as a failure. But in its initial stages, the Wall Street Journal hailed it for restoring the U.S. military’s “moral credibility.” The Journal added, “There is a word for this: colonialism.” The Somalia invasion provided a template for the U.S. and its European allies to justify unilateral intervention in Bosnia (to set up “safe havens”) and in Kosovo (to justify the 1999 war). Taking a page from the Kosovo playbook, U.S. forces adopted a “bomb them with butter” strategy in Afghanistan—until media sources revealed that the cluster bombs the U.S. dropped could be easily mistaken for food packets. Despite this blatant Pentagon attempt at “humanitarian” propaganda, only a courageous few famine-relief and refugee-aid NGOs criticized it. Most remained silent.

This magazine has devoted many articles to exposing the underlying geopolitical aims of these apparently “humanitarian” endeavors. I won’t repeat them here.19 But even neoconservative ideologues grudgingly acknowledge the liberals’ trailblazing role. Boot, for example, urges action “for the good of the natives,” a phrase that once made progressives snort in derision, but may be taken more seriously after the left’s conversion (or rather, reversion) in the 1990s to the cause of ‘humanitarian’ interventions.”20 Of course, the liberal champions of humanitarian intervention don’t call what they advocate “colonialism.” Rather, they invent euphemisms like “the responsibility to protect,” the term...
of choice for a Canadian government-appointed International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) that drew up procedures the "international community" might invoke to intervene to prevent genocide or other human rights abuses. The ICISS’s report, released in December 2001, attempts to enunciate a new definition of state "sovereignty" (i.e. the right of a state to control affairs within its borders):

…sovereignty implies a dual responsibility: externally—to respect the sovereignty of other states, and internally, to respect the dignity and basic rights of all the people within the state. In international human rights covenants, in UN practice, and in state practice itself, sovereignty is now understood as embracing this dual responsibility. Sovereignty as responsibility has become the minimum content of good international citizenship.21

This kind of rhetoric has a lofty-sounding appeal intended to warm the hearts of liberals everywhere. But when one takes it from the realm of rhetoric into the realm of reality, a few obvious questions come up. The ICISS views state sovereignty on a sliding scale, so that states that violate the human rights of their citizens forfeit their right to be free from intervention—even military intervention—from other states. But how would this work in reality? With a few powerful states dominating the world, can there be any doubt that they will determine whose human rights abuses will be punished and whose will be excused? Noam Chomsky shows that U.S.-allied regimes regularly commit atrocities as bad as or worse than the ones NATO’s war was supposed to stop in Kosovo.22 Stacks of United Nations resolutions condemn Israel’s atrocities against the Palestinians. But there will be no "humanitarian intervention" against Israel as long as the U.S. can veto it. What is more, can anyone seriously accept the idea that the most powerful nations in the world will agree to be held to the same standards that they hold the rest of the world? In 1994, the United States invaded Haiti, deposed its government and reinstalled President Jean Bertrand Aristide. Yet the idea, say, of Haiti invading the U.S. in defense of Haitian Americans robbed of their vote in Florida in the 2000 presidential election exists only in the realm of fantasy.23 Yet "humanitarian intervention" continues to have a powerful appeal. Even as harsh a critic of U.S. foreign policy as British journalist Robert Fisk accepts this rationale. Fisk, who regularly denounces Israel’s invasion of the Occupied Territories as "the last colonial war," recently urged the West to

… close down the Middle East war. With Russian and EU and UN support, there will, eventually, be American and NATO troops in Jerusalem. There will be a Western protection force in the West Bank and Gaza — and in Israel. The Israeli and Palestinian armies will have to return to barracks. Jerusalem will be an international city. The Palestinians will have security. So will the Israelis. Yes, it will be a form of international colonialism. Yes, it will mean foreign occupation for both sides. But it will put an end to this filthy war.24

Conservatives have merely taken these "humanitarian" justifications for intervention and attached the "war on terrorism" to them. Consider this recent statement from Richard Haass, the State Department’s number two man, representing the most conservative U.S. administration in decades:

What you’re seeing from this administration is the emergence of a new principle or body of ideas. I’m not sure it constitutes a doctrine [on] sovereignty. Sovereignty entails obligations. One is not to massacre your own people. Another is not to support terrorism in any way. If a government fails to meet these obligations, then it forfeits some of the normal advantages of sovereignty, including the right to be left alone inside your own territory. Other governments, including the United States, gain the right to intervene. In the case of terrorism, this can even lead to a right of preventive, or peremptory self-defense. You essentially can act in anticipation if you have grounds to think it’s a question of when, and not if, you’re going to be attacked.”25

If the liberal ICISS can justify intervention against genocide, then conservatives can argue that invading and occupying Iraq will prevent Saddam Hussein from committing genocide with its weapons of mass destruction.

Bosnia and Kosovo

Whatever the rhetorical justification, the end result is the same: the forcible (and usually uninvited) entry of Western
military forces into a weaker country, the deposing of its government, and the setting up of a Western-backed caretaker
time. The difference between these imperial ventures and their 19th century cousins is one of degree, not of kind. A
look at the regimes currently running the Western protectorates in Bosnia and Kosovo proves this.

The Bosnian statelet, a forced marriage of the Bosnian Serb Republic and the Muslim-Croat Federation, formed under
the aegis of the 1995 Dayton Accords ending the Bosnian civil war. Under the occupation of 35,000 NATO troops and
another army of United Nations and NGO "nation building" specialists, the statelet remains a ward of the "international
community." A UN-appointed High Representative, currently the American diplomat Jacques Klein, runs the statelet as
a dictator who can decide when local elections happen, who can participate in them, and what the media will say about
them. In 1999, Klein’s predecessor, Carlos Westendorp, unilaterally fired Nikola Poplasen, the Bosnian Serb president
chosen in Western-run "free" elections. Poplasen’s crime? Criticizing the Dayton Accords. The Office of High
Representative (OHR) can impose legislation on the two ethnically dominated enclaves. Westendorp went so far as to
decide on the statelet’s flag design and the content of its school textbooks. By 1999, employees of the massive foreign
bureaucracy accounted for one-third of the area’s gross domestic product.

The Western nation builders feel their high-handedness is justified because they’re preventing a renewal of civil war
and ethnic cleansing. In one sense they’re right, because that is the way they set up the colony. The Dayton Accords’
dirty secret is that the military occupation enforces a partition between the national groups. This partition, then,
reinforces nationalist politicians and ethnic economic mafias’ control over each ethnic enclave. These mafias have no
interest in helping war refugees return to their original homes in ethnically mixed regions. Instead, they encourage the
resettlement of their "own" ethnicity inside their ethnic enclaves and intimidate refugees from other ethnicities to flee to
other enclaves. "The leaders of the nationalist parties have themselves pocketed large amounts of aid money, while
ordinary workers go homeless and jobless by the thousands." The NATO military occupation may have put a lid on
the military conflict, but it is setting back any hope for the people of the region to determine their own destiny. That's all
right with Western colonial administrators—and their cheerleaders in the Western liberal media—because they assume
the people of the region are "ill at ease with the most basic principles of democracy," as the OHR once put it. "Once the
capacity of the Bosnian people as rational political actors is negated," writes one of the protectorate’s chief critics,
"there is no reason, in principle for international administration to be seen as merely temporary or transitional, nor for
democracy to be seen as preferable."27

NATO-occupied Kosovo has in many ways replicated the Bosnian experience. More than 40,000 NATO troops patrol
the province. Nevertheless, NATO stood by while Albanian extremists harassed and murdered ethnic Serbs. As a
result, almost all Serbs who lived in the Kosovo have fled to Serbia or live in a northern Kosovo enclave effectively
partitioned from the rest of the province by Western troops. Thousands of UN and NGO nation builders provide the only
stable source of employment in the province. Because the only major economic activity flows from NGO-dominated
Pristina, the capital’s population has doubled since the war. This has placed great strain on all public services and led
to an epidemic of corruption in house construction permits. An estimated 10,000 people are squatting in empty
government buildings. While thousands of Kosovars remain homeless, the U.S. military finished building its permanent
Camp Bondsteel headquarters in 2000. Instead of addressing these crises, the UN Administrative Mission in Kosovo
(UNMIK) is readying a massive privatization program that will make economic life for ordinary Kosovars—who already
face a 50 percent unemployment rate—even more difficult.

Elections in February 2002 produced the hoped-for "moderate" parliament, but UN High Representative Michael Steiner
intervened heavily to win the necessary two-thirds parliamentary vote to make moderate nationalist Ibrahim Rugova
Kosovo’s president. Just what Rugova’s government can accomplish is anyone’s guess, as Steiner remains the
ultimate decision-maker in the province. The Kosovo government cannot declare independence from Serbia because
NATO and the UN oppose it. The government has no control over the defense, interior, justice or foreign affairs
ministries—all of which Western officials occupy. At the same time, the Serb minority in Kosovo distrusts the UN/NATO
colonial regime, which they see rightly as favoring the Kosovar Albanians. Serb nationalists in Mitrovica attacked UN
forces in April 2002, leading to fears of an increase in ethnic conflict there. As the UN and NATO attempt to maintain an
unsustainable status quo, the Kosovo colony will lurch from crisis to crisis. And the "international community’s"
occupation will extend far into the future.28
The experience with colonialism in Bosnia and Kosovo is hardly the success its proponents advertise. "These colonial administrations deny self-determination to the people they are supposed to be helping. Rather than helping the oppressed "get on their feet," they have evolved into permanent occupations. As in all colonial administrations, the colonizers' needs for "stability" and investment trump the social needs of the colonized population. These protectorates remain a throwback to an earlier era of League of Nations mandates and UN trusteeships. Ironically, they became a model for a new colonialism during the 1990s, the decade the UN declared the "International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism."

**Colonialism of a different type?**

So far, colonial administrations have been confined to discreet global "hot spots" where interventionists made the case on "humanitarian" grounds. But now that colonialism has been rehabilitated in humanitarian clothes, its proponents will have no scruples about extending it wherever they can impose it. The Bush administration openly talks of overthrowing governments, such as Iraq’s, without any "humanitarian" pretext. After charging the government of Afghanistan with "harboring terrorists," it invaded, killed thousands of Afghans and overthrew the Taliban regime. A shaky colonial protectorate in Afghanistan is emerging from the ruins of the war. The U.S. clearly hopes to replace the "failed state" that played host to Al Quaida with a pro-U.S. government eager to sign natural gas pipeline deals with Western petrochemical companies.

Because the definition of a "failed state" deserving of colonial rule remains elastic in the hands of the Bushes and Blairs of the world, it can be used to justify intervention in virtually any state the U.S. opposes. The U.S. military moved to step up its intervention in Colombia in 1999 after the U.S. national security apparatus began describing the country as undergoing "Balkanization" and "the eventuality of a total collapse of the Colombian state."29 The Bangkok Post’s Khor recounted his shock at hearing a "senior official" appearing at a conference on "global governance" describe evolving thinking in the U.S.:

> …[W]hat was really frightening was when the senior official elaborated that the definition of "failed states" was not confined to the countries that had already been often accused of being ‘terrorist,’ such as Iraq, North Korea or those in a state of anarchy like Somalia. The ‘failed states’ would include countries such as Iran, Egypt and Nigeria, which are unable to provide jobs, education and development for their own people.
> . . . Many if not most, developing countries, can be categorized as having failed to generate growth or development of the type or rate to satisfy the basic food, employment, housing and education needs of the majority of people. 30

Boot lists Afghanistan, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Palestine, Iran and Pakistan ("the same lands where generations of British colonial soldiers went on campaigns") as the most likely targets for a U.S-led new colonialism. It’s no coincidence that most of these places have some relation to the oil-rich Middle East and Caspian Sea regions.

Unlike 19th century India or Congo, Bosnia and Kosovo have little economic value to their colonial masters. The U.S. intervened in Bosnia and Kosovo to enforce "stability" that would protect Western Europe’s economy and sustain the Western incorporation of chunks of the USSR’s former empire. This geopolitical urge to empire is most likely paramount in U.S. plans. In an amazingly candid article, right-wing Harvard military analyst Stephen Peter Rosen explained this imperial logic.

> A political unit has overwhelming superiority in military power, and uses that power to influence the internal behavior of other states, is called an empire. Because the United States does not seek to control territory or govern the overseas citizens of the empire, we are an indirect empire, to be sure, but an empire nonetheless. If this is correct, our goal is not combating a rival [i.e. as in the Cold War–LS], but maintaining our imperial position, and maintaining imperial order.
> …Now we are in the business of bringing down hostile governments and creating governments favorable to us. Conventional international wars end and troops are brought back home. Imperial wars end, but imperial garrisons must be left in place for decades to ensure order and stability. This is, in
fact, what we are beginning to see, first in the Balkans and now in Central Asia.31

This mean economic exploitation of colonies isn’t only a thing of the past. When imperialist ideologues start talking about colonial administrations in oil- and gas-rich regions, their analogies to the British Raj don’t sound like rhetorical excess anymore. Bush’s vaunted energy plan assumes greater U.S. dependence on overseas sources of oil and gas in the 21st century. Foreign affairs analyst Michael Klare draws out the implications: "The United States cannot increase its intake of foreign oil by 50 percent, as called for under the Bush energy plan, without involving itself in the political, economic, and military affairs of the states from which all this petroleum is expected to flow. This involvement may take the financial and diplomatic forms in most cases, but will also often entail military action."32 If this accurately describes the future of U.S. policy, then the new colonialism will take on aspects of the old colonialism.

Yet there is still quite a distance to be traveled between right-wing ideologues’ hankering for the "glories" of the British Raj and Washington’s direct rule over countries around the world. At present, the arguments for new colonialism seem calculated to supply a transcendent ideological purpose to the Bush administration’s grab bag of warmongering policies. The new colonialism or Cooper’s "new imperialism" may be little more than publicists’ briefs for the naked use of U.S. military might to target U.S. enemies ("rogue states") and to overthrow their governments ("regime change").

What of the other key component of the old colonialism: the scramble for colonies among major world powers opening the way to war between them? Certainly talk of war and preparations for war are the order of today. But it will be some time before a clear military conflict between the major powers emerges. Nevertheless, our early 21st century vantage point shouldn’t blind us to the possibilities. The projection of U.S. power into Central Asia under the cover of the "war on terrorism" makes the U.S. a major player in that region of conflict over the area’s oil and gas. War and peace in the region will hinge on the relations between emerging (India, Iran, Turkey) and major (Russia, China, U.S.) powers. "Small" wars between the main powers (the Russo-Japanese War of 1905) and their proxies (the Balkan Wars of the 1910s) preceded—and stoked—the all-out clash of titans in the First World War.

For decades, many on the left dismissed talk of "imperialism" and "colonialism" as Marxist jargon of yesteryear. But today’s new colonialists confidently declare themselves imperialists and colonialists. They are looking to prepare the ideological ground for a vast expansion of U.S. and Western power around the world—and for the wars that will enforce it. They believe that the unassailed position of the U.S. as the world’s only military superpower affords them the opportunity to win back much of what they lost to national liberation struggles and anti-imperialist movements in Western metropoles. A left that rejects this return to the 19th century must proudly take up the banner of anti-imperialism and champion self-determination for all the world’s oppressed peoples.

NOTES
3 See Robert Cooper, "The Post Modern State" (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2001) at http://ftc.org.uk. The Foreign Policy Centre is a Blairite think tank whose board of directors includes the one-time leftist Middle East scholar Fred Halliday.
8 In addition to Lenin’s Imperialism and "The Socialist Revolution …", see Nikolai Bukharin’s Imperialism and World Economy (London: Merlin Press, 1972).
10 The information from this section comes from David Whitehouse and Meneejeh Moradian, "Gandhi’s politics: The
experiment with nonviolence," unpublished manuscript. They cite the work of Indian economists and historians Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh C. Dutt, Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Panikkar, B.M. Bhatia and Sucheta Mahajan.


15 Nor did this prevent numerous U.S. military interventions nor periods of direct colonial occupation, as when the U.S. invaded an occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Also the Monroe Doctrine aimed to keep the Western Hemisphere closed to other potential challengers to U.S. domination.


20 Boot, op cit.


23 In fact, the humor newspaper The Onion made hay on this in November, 2000 when it ran a mock interview with Serbian President Vladimir Kostunica pledging to send Serbian peacekeepers to Florida to assure that America carried out a democratic election!


26 Paul D'Amato, "Bosnia: Model for a new colonialism?" in *International Socialist Review* 8 (Summer, 1999), p. 11. This article is an excellent review of NATO's Bosnian colony.


