

The [American] Empire -- A Status Report

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The events of recent years indicate that the world is wising up to and becoming less intimidated by Washington's overarching ambition for world dominance. Latin America is increasingly attempting to escape the empire's clutches. Leaders keenly aware of how US imperialism works and determined to keep it out of their own country are in power in Venezuela, Uruguay, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, and perhaps the latest addition, Paraguay.

And now Africa has turned down Washington's offer to be part of the imperial family. African governments have refused to host Africom, the US Africa Command. The Washington Post reported that "worry swept the continent that the United States planned major new military installations in Africa", and despite the promise of new development and security partnerships, many Africans concluded that Africom was primarily an extension of US counterterrorism policy, intended to keep an eye on Africa's large Muslim population. The United States "equates terrorism with Islam," said a senior Kenyan diplomat, and few African governments wanted to be seen as inviting US surveillance on their own people. [note from your editor: It would be more instructive to equate anti-American terrorism with American foreign policy, including building military bases in other people's countries.]

When Bush visited Africa in February, he was told by the Ghanaian president: "You're not going to build any bases in Ghana." US-funded aid groups protested plans to expand the American military's role in economic development in Africa, sharply objecting to working alongside US troops. Said an Africom officer: "[Africom] was seen as a massive infusion of military might onto a continent that was quite proud of having removed foreign powers from its soil." [1]

There's also the oil factor. The US imports more oil from African nations than from Saudi Arabia, and the continent has huge unexplored areas. This undoubtedly is a major motivation behind Washington's desire for an expanded military presence in the region. The United States is not about to take Africa's rejection of Africom as the last word; indeed, some of the tough rhetoric by African officials may be for public consumption, for the US already has somewhat of a military presence on the continent. It will be interesting to observe the ongoing tug of war between Washington and African nationalists/anti-imperialists over expansion of the American presence.

Democracy American Style

Here's White House spokeswoman Dana Perino at a recent press briefing:

Reporter: The American people are being asked to die and pay for this, and you're saying that they have no say in this war?

Perino: I didn't say that ... this President was elected --

Reporter: Well, what it amounts to is you saying we have no input at all.

Perino: You had input. The American people have input every four years, and that's the way our system is set up.[2]

In 1941, Edward Dowling, editor and priest, commented: "The two greatest obstacles to democracy in the United States are, first, the widespread delusion among the poor that we have a democracy, and second, the chronic terror among the rich, lest we get it."

Can we look forward to Perino's memoir after she leaves the White House in which, like her predecessor Scott McClellan recently, she confesses that she was part of a "permanent campaign" mode to deceive the American public? I'm prepared to welcome her into the fold as I have McClellan. I have a soft spot in my heart for political late bloomers. I used to work for the State Department when I was a good, loyal anti-communist.

Washington's grand and noble new ally in the Free World

Scott McClellan has been criticized for not expressing his reservations about Bush administration policies while still at the White House. This would have indeed taken a measure of courage few people have, and likely meant his job and career committing suicide. I'm reminded of Carla Del Ponte, the Swiss diplomat who in 1999 became Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, located in The Hague, Netherlands. In accordance with her official duties, she looked into possible war crimes of all the participants in the conflicts of the 1990s surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia and the NATO (read the United States) 78-day bombing of Serbia and its province of Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians were trying to secede. In late December 1999, in an interview with The Observer of London, Del Ponte was asked if she was prepared to press criminal charges against NATO personnel (and not just against the former Yugoslav republics). She replied: "If I am not willing to do that, I am not in the right place. I must give up my mission."

The Tribunal then announced that it had completed a study of possible NATO crimes, declaring: "It is very important for this tribunal to assert its authority over any and all authorities to the armed conflict within the former Yugoslavia."

Was this a sign from heaven that the new millennium (2000 was but a week away) was going to be one of more equal international justice? Could this really be?

No, it couldn't. From official quarters, military and civilian, of the United States and Canada, came disbelief, shock, anger, denials ... "appalling" ... "unjustified". Del Ponte got the message. Her office quickly issued a statement: "NATO is not under investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. There is no formal inquiry into the actions of NATO during the conflict in Kosovo." [3]

Del Ponte remained in her position until the end of 2007, leaving to become the Swiss ambassador to Argentina; at the same time writing a book about her time with the Tribunal -- "The Hunt: Me and War Criminals", published two months ago but available at the moment only in Italian. It hasn't been much reported yet what del Ponte has said about NATO, but the book has already created a scandal in Europe, for in it she reveals how the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) abducted hundreds of Serbs in 1999, and took them to Kosovo's fellow Muslims in Albania where they were killed, their kidneys and other body parts then removed and sold for transplant in other countries.

The KLA for years has been engaging in other equally charming activities, such as heavy trafficking in drugs, trafficking in women, various acts of terrorism, and carrying out ethnic cleansing of Serbs who have had the bad fortune to be in Kosovo because it's long been their home. Between 1998 and

2002, the KLA appeared at times on the State Department terrorism list; at first because of its tactic of targeting innocent Serb civilians in order to provoke retaliation from Serbian troops; later because Mujahadeen mercenaries from various Islamic countries, including some tied to al Qaeda, were fighting alongside the KLA, as they were in Bosnia with the Bosnian Muslims during the 1990s Yugoslav civil wars.[4] The KLA remained on the terrorist list until the US decided to make them an ally, in some measure due to the existence of a major American military base in Kosovo, Camp Bondsteel. (It's remarkable, is it not, how these bases pop up all around the world?) In November 2005, following a visit there, Alvaro Gil-Robles, the human rights envoy of the Council of Europe, described the camp as a "smaller version of Guantanamo", referring to the detainees there at the time from Washington's various wars, including the so-called War on Terror.[5]

On February 17 of this year, in a move of highly questionable international legality, the KLA declared the independence of Kosovo from Serbia. The next day the United States recognized this new "nation", thus affirming the unilateral declaration of independence of a part of another country's territory. The new country has as its prime minister a gentleman named Hashim Thaci, described in Del Ponte's book as the brain behind the abductions of Serbs and the sale of their organs. The new gangster state of Kosovo is supported by Washington and other Western powers who can't forgive Serbia-Yugoslavia-Milosevic -- "the last communists of Europe" -- for not wanting to wholeheartedly embrace the NATO/US/European Union triumvirate, which recognizes no higher power, United Nations or other. The independent state of Kosovo is regarded as reliably pro-west, a state that will serve as a militarized outpost for the triumvirate, which is intent on further encircling Russia and pushing it out of Europe.

In her book, Del Ponte asserts that there was sufficient evidence for prosecution of Kosovo Albanians involved in war crimes, but the investigation "was nipped in the bud", focusing instead on "the crimes committed by Serbia." She claims that she could do nothing because it was next to impossible to collect evidence in Kosovo, which was swarming with criminals, in and out of the government. Witnesses were intimidated, and even judges in The Hague were afraid of the Kosovo Albanians.

In April, the Swiss Foreign Department issued a statement that Del Ponte's book "contains statements which are impermissible for a representative of the government of Switzerland", ordered her to return to her ambassadorial post in Argentina, and prohibited any further appearances promoting her book. The Swiss have officially recognized the independence of Kosovo and established an embassy in the country. Kosovo appears likely to remain a highly controversial issue in Europe and Washington for some time to come.[6]

Reason number 3,468 to yearn for the lifting of the capitalist weight from our souls

My phone company, Verizon, recently raised the monthly charge for my international call plan by 30 percent. I phoned them to find out the reason for this and was told that their competitors had raised their charge for the international plan and so Verizon was doing the same. "To stay competitive", the earnest young man told me. I thought I must be misunderstanding him. We've all been raised to believe that one of the beauties of capitalism is that it provides a competitive environment which induces businesses to lower their rates so as to lure away customers from their competitors. In the end, the consumer benefits from lower prices. And this makes sense, at least within the capitalist framework. (Although there have of course been numerous cases of large companies lowering prices to force a small company -- which initiated the price cuts -- out of business, after which the large companies raise their prices back up.) But now? Now we're told that competition leads to price increases. What, pray tell, is there left of the system for us to believe in?

Supply and demand? Like in Burma, following the recent devastating cyclone? Prices for food and

other essentials have risen significantly since the disaster. As they should, according to the revered and beloved law of supply and demand, inasmuch as things are obviously in short supply in Burma and people's needs are plainly much greater than usual. What could make more sense under circumstances of human desperation than to raise prices?

Yet, though questioning the law of supply and demand is normally regarded in the same light as being skeptical of the law of gravity, I have to do so, and refer to things I've expressed before: The price of gasoline in the United States has been increasing on a regular basis for a rather long time now, but there's no shortage of supply. There are no lines of cars waiting hours at gas stations trying to fill up before the pumps run dry. And there's been a considerable fall in demand as less-than-rich drivers cut back on car use. It does not require total cynicism to wonder whether the law of supply and demand has been repealed. Or can it be that what is known as "supply and demand" is not really any kind of immutable "law", but rather (choke, gasp) "corporate policies"?

The oil companies are currently spending big bucks to convince the American public that the super-high gasoline prices are not the companies' fault. "The industry," reported the Washington Post, "is trying to convince voters -- who, in turn, will make the case to their members of Congress -- that rising energy prices are not the producers' fault and that government efforts to punish the industry, especially with higher taxes, would only make pricing problems worse." [7]

Do the oil companies think they're being misunderstood? The next time you run into a friendly oil company executive ask him this: "If you lowered prices to what they were two years ago, would consumers stage protests outside your headquarters? Would the FBI raid your offices? Would your breathtakingly obscenely high profits drop into the red? Could you still maintain your decadent millionaire lifestyle? The oil companies are perfectly free to very significantly lower prices without anything that you or I would call financial suffering. But they don't do it. So what's being misunderstood by the public which obliges the companies to spend millions on advertisements? Money which could go toward price reductions.

Oil company executives at least produce a useful product compared to people in the hedge funds business. What are hedge funds, you ask? They're private, largely unregulated pools of capital whose managers can buy or sell any kind of assets. The income of the fund's executives -- often in the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars, sometimes even a billion -- is taxed as capital gains, a much lower tax rate than if it were taxed as regular earnings. One can say that hedge funds are simply pure speculation carried to absurdity; typical of the new American Dream: getting rich through speculation and inheritance instead of through skill, enterprise, and filling a human social need.

Here is Daniel Strachman, a former hedge fund consultant and author of "The Fundamentals of Hedge Fund Management." He's skeptical of raising taxes on hedge fund managers, saying they should be rewarded for taking huge risks. [So do firefighters, police officers, and bank robbers of course.] Most managers have their own money in their funds, he declares, and suffer massive losses when their investments go bad. "It's clear somebody has to win and somebody has to lose", says Strachman. "It's not pretty at all because people say, 'Oh my God. Look how much money these guys are making while people are losing their homes and are complaining about the cost of eggs and sugar.' But so what? We don't live in a society that is pretty all the time. That's why it's capitalism." [8]

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Notes:

[1] Washington Post, June 1, 2008, p.18

[2] White House press briefing, March 20, 2008

[3] The Observer (London), December 26, 1999; Washington Times, December 30 and 31, 1999; New York Times, December 30, 1999

[4] There are numerous articles in the world press of the past 20 years about the KLA's inordinate thuggery; Google "KLA" and one or more of the key words, such as drugs, prostitution, ethnic cleansing, transplants, etc.

[5] <http://wikipedia.org/>, under "Camp Bondsteel"

[6] Del Ponte's book and the turmoil it's produced have been largely ignored in the US media, but if one does a Google on her name and the book, one will find many reports from Europe.

[7] Washington Post, May 9, 2008, p.D1

[8] Washington Post, April 17, 2008, p.D1

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Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-1098.html>