

Imperialism, War & Terrorism

**Doug Lorimer
& Dave Holmes**

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War, Imperialism & Revolution

By Doug Lorimer

For those who believed that the overwhelming demonstration of US military power in Afghanistan and Iraq would “shock and awe” the rest of the world — and particularly Washington’s foes and aspiring rivals — into accepting its goal of making the 21st century a “new American century” of US political and economic global domination, 2006 was not a good year.

Not only has Washington become ever more bogged down — at the current rate of nearly three billion dollars and 20 soldiers’ lives a week — in a now publicly acknowledged failing counterinsurgency war in Iraq, but a resurgent Taliban has exposed the fragility of what gains have been made in Afghanistan since the US-led military campaign ousted the group from power five years ago.

Meanwhile in Lebanon, a US-backed Sunni-Christian government finds itself under siege from an opposition alliance between the secular Christian-based Free Patriotic Movement, the Lebanese Communist Party and the Shiite-based Hezbollah movement, which has emerged from the July-August US-Israeli war against Lebanon stronger and more confident than ever.

In 2006 the two surviving members of US President George Bush’s “Axis of Evil” — North Korea and Iran — continued to defy Washington. North Korea ended its longstanding moratorium on testing its ballistic missiles on the Fourth of July, thus making its own rather defiant contribution to the fireworks traditionally associated with Washington’s Independence Day celebrations. Apparently dissatisfied with Washington’s appreciation of this display, Pyongyang defiantly conducted its first nuclear weapons test four months later

In April, Iran announced that it had successfully enriched uranium and

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subsequently dismissed US and European demands, in blatant contradiction to Iran's supposed "inalienable rights" under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, that it indefinitely halt its enrichment program..

The year ended with Washington securing a UN Security Council resolution imposing economic sanctions on Iran, that is a freeze on the foreign financial assets of 10 Iranian organisations and 12 Iranian individuals involved in Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. However, the final resolution, the outcome of four months of diplomatic haggling, was so watered down at Russia's and China's insistence and provides so many exemptions to the mandated sanctions as make them meaningless. As the December 28 *New York Jewish Weekly* observed: "The UN sanctions package for Iran might have come with one of those labels so familiar from other seasonal deliveries: some assembly required, teeth not included."

Thus, according to paragraphs 12 and 13 of the resolution, funds of the designated organisations and individuals are frozen except in two cases:

1. If the funds are needed to meet regular expenses.
2. If the funds are needed to meet extraordinary expenses.

The resolution also bans the export to Iran of all material and equipment related to Iran's nuclear and missile programs, except for material and equipment specified in all contracts signed before the resolution was adopted,

Perhaps the biggest blow to Washington's imperial ambitions came on November 7 when the majority of US voters used the mid-term congressional elections to indicate their opposition to the Bush administration's war policy.

While the warhawks predictably claimed that the results reflected more the US public's lack of confidence in the way Bush had carried out the Iraq war policy than on the policy itself, a battery of opinion polls in both the run-up to the elections and immediately afterward found that a large majority of US voters believe the administration's belligerent foreign policy had made their country — as well as the rest of the world — less, rather than more, secure.

On December 7, for example, the Centre for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland released the results of a survey that found that 6 out of 10 US voters believe that threatening foreign governments with "regime change" makes them more likely to develop weapons of mass destruction to defend themselves. When told that North Korea has offered to eliminate its nuclear weapons in exchange for a US nonaggression pact, and asked if Washington should accept this North Korean offer, 7 out of 10 US voters said yes.

Three-quarters of those surveyed thought that Washington should seek "to build better relations" with Iran rather than trying to pressure it "with implied threats that

the US may use military force”. Fifty-five per cent were in favour of the US agreeing to Iran’s demand that it be allowed to enrich uranium under United Nations supervision to the low levels necessary for nuclear power.

With regard to Iraq, the survey found that 58% of US voters believed the US military presence was provoking more violence than it was preventing. Seventy-five per cent want all US troops withdrawn within one year.

In direct opposition to this, Bush reportedly plans to put an extra 20,000 US combat troops into Iraq in 2007, with most of them being deployed to “stabilise” Baghdad. This has already been tried before and failed. As part of Operation Forward Together, between August and October last year, US combat troop strength in Baghdad was doubled with an extra 14,000 US soldiers being deployed there. The increased number of US military patrols and raids throughout the city had little impact on the scale of the anti-occupation insurgency. All it did was lead to a surge in the US casualty rate — from 48 US troops killed in July to 65 in August, to 72 in September and 110 in October. In November, the US troop death toll fell to 79 — still almost double the level in the months before the July-October Baghdad offensive. It then jumped again with 118 US soldiers being killed in December, making that month third deadliest for the US forces in Iraq since the occupation began in March 2003. The two previous deadliest months were April and November 2004, when 135 and 137 US troops were killed. In both of those two months, the US occupation forces suffered high casualties during bloody assaults on the heavily defended rebel city of Fallujah, 55 kilometres west of Baghdad.

The reason why a 20,000 “surge” in the size of the US occupation force in Iraq will not enable Washington to defeat the anti-occupation insurgency was revealed by the results of a survey of Iraqi public opinion taken in the second half of 2006 by the US State Department and by the University of Maryland’s Program for International Policy Attitudes (PIPA).

The September 27 *Washington Post* had reported that, according to a US State Department survey, in Baghdad “nearly three-quarters of residents polled said they would feel safer if US and other foreign forces left Iraq, with 65% of those asked favouring an immediate pull-out”.

The *Post*’s report added that interviews with “Baghdad residents in recent weeks suggest one central cause for Iraqi distrust of the Americans: They believe the US government has deliberately thrown the country into chaos ... to create an excuse to keep its forces here.”

This was confirmed by the PIPA survey, conducted on September 1-4. It found that an “overwhelming majority” of Iraqis “believe that the US military presence in

Iraq is provoking more conflict than it is preventing”. This view was held by 78% of Iraqis — by 82% of Shiites and a near-unanimous 97% of Sunnis.

The PIPA poll also found that 61% of Iraqis approved of insurgent attacks on US forces — up from 47% in January. Support for attacks on US forces among Shiites had risen from 41% in January to 62% in September. Support for such attacks among Sunnis was 92%, up from 88% in January.

Bush’s plan to deploy an extra 20,000 US combat troops runs counter to the public comments made by General John Abizaid, the Pentagon’s top Middle East commander, in testimony given on November 15 before the US Senate armed services committee. Abizaid said the US Army and Marine Corps simply do not have enough troops to sustain a larger force in Iraq for very long. “We can put in 20,000 more Americans tomorrow and achieve a temporary effect. But when you look at the overall American force pool that’s available out there, the ability to sustain that commitment is simply not something that we have right now with the size of the Army and the Marine Corps”, he told the committee.

Over the course of 2006, US commanders have grown increasingly alarmed about the burden long deployments in Iraq are placing on the regular army. General Peter Schoomaker, the US Army’s chief of staff, warned Congress last month that the active-duty army “will break” under the strain of current Iraq war deployments.

Former secretary of state Colin Powell, a retired US Army general who headed the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1989 to 1993, told CBS TV’s December 17 *Face the Nation* program that “the active army is about broken” and that the US was “not winning, we are losing” the war in Iraq. Commenting on proposals for a “surge” in US troop strength in Iraq, Powell said: “There really are no additional troops. All we would be doing is keeping some of the troops who were there, there longer and escalating or accelerating the arrival of other troops.”

While the majority of ordinary Americans, like the majority of ordinary Australians, are opposed to the war in Iraq, the big challenge facing Marxists and other antiwar activists in both countries is to turn this passive opposition into activity, into mass protest. The experience of the struggle against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and early 1970s demonstrated that only when this happens on a sustained basis will it led to active resistance by the working-class youth who make up the ranks of the imperialist rulers’ armies to being passive cannon fodder, thus causing the collapse of the imperialist military machine as a reliable fighting force.

Marxism & pacifism

The Marxist approach to war differs radically from the pacifist approach. In his classic pamphlet, *Socialism and War*, Lenin distinguished between the Marxist and pacifist oppositions to war:

Socialists [Lenin wrote] have always condemned wars between nations as barbarous and brutal. Our attitude towards war is fundamentally different from that of the bourgeois pacifists ... in that we understand the inevitable connection between wars and the class struggle within a country; we understand that wars cannot be abolished unless classes are abolished and socialism is created; we also differ in that we regard civil wars, i.e., wars waged by an oppressed class against the oppressor class, by slaves against slaveholders, by serfs against landowners, and by wage workers against the bourgeoisie, as fully legitimate, progressive and necessary. We Marxists differ from pacifists ... in that we deem it necessary to study each war historically (from the standpoint of Marx's dialectical materialism) and separately. There have been in the past numerous wars which, despite all the horrors, atrocities, distress and suffering that inevitably accompany all wars, were progressive, i.e., benefited the development of mankind.¹

We Marxists reject an absolute position on war. We examine each war concretely and separately, locating each in its distinct historical context. We disagree with pacifists that all war is bad, immoral and harmful to those who engage in it. Those are ahistorical, moralistic dogmas divorced from material reality. Indeed, from our working-class viewpoint, rejecting necessary or liberating violence is inherently immoral. A gun used in war by a Warsaw Ghetto fighter aimed at a German soldier was an instrument of liberation. The same gun in the hands of a German soldier aimed at a Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto was an instrument of Nazi terror. An abstract disgust with guns and violence cannot see this truth — only politics and class morality can.

We Marxists don't equate the violence of the oppressor with the violence of the oppressed. We don't agree with pacifists that the violence of oppressed people or workers' revolution debases the human spirit by practising hatred, and that it should be replaced by a strategy of winning over enemies through nonviolent reconciliation, Christian love or moral witness. Pacifists preach peaceful reconciliation of differences between oppressor and oppressed — “nonviolent conflict resolution” — not the class hostility and hatred workers should feel for their exploiters.

Ruling classes have never in all of recorded human history paid the slightest attention to pacifist or moral pleadings to peacefully give up their wealth and power. Pacifists consequently direct their appeals to the oppressed, which disarms and weakens successful resistance and contributes to the maintenance of the system which causes war.

The Marxist approach to supporting or opposing a particular war draws heavily on the early 19th century Prussian writer and soldier, Carl von Clausewitz, arguably the greatest theoretician of war. Clausewitz's starting point was the famous proposition that "war is politics continued by other [that is, violent] means" This, Lenin noted, "was always the standpoint of Marx and Engels, who regarded any war as the continuation of the politics of the powers concerned — and the various classes within these countries — in a definite period".² Lenin later expanded on that idea, saying that we have to look at "the class character of war: what caused that war, what classes are waging it, and what historical and historical-economic conditions gave rise to it ..."³

As Marxists, we attempt to analyse all of the political aspects of a war: the real policies (not the stated ones) of which the war is a continuation, and the policies of the classes waging the war. To fully understand the politics of the war, we have to examine all of the belligerent powers, not just one. If we agree with the politics that have led to the war, then we continue to support the struggle for those politics, even when they are continued through violent means, through war. Conversely, if we are political opponents of those politics, of the policies of the ruling classes and governments involved, we don't put aside our political opposition when the struggle is continued by other, violent means. We remain opponents of the politics that led to the war, and therefore of the war itself.

This key unlocks the mystification that surrounds war. It makes plain the method that we use to decide which wars we consider just, progressive and worthy of support, and which we consider reactionary, unjust and not worthy of support. We are for wars we can support politically — we are in favour wars of national liberation, wars for democracy, and revolutions and civil wars of the oppressed against their oppressors. We oppose those wars whose politics we reject: wars for the defence or expansion of the wealth, power and privileges of the exploiting and oppressor classes. It is our politics, political analysis of real events and political judgment on the dynamics of the forces and events propelling any war, placed in their historical, economic and class context, that determine our position on each, separate war.

Two eras of war

Marx and Engels did not abstain on the question of war. They took definite sides on particular wars using the criteria of victory or defeat for which of the belligerent camps most represented historical progress. That approach was appropriate to the era of ascending capitalism when the socialist revolution was not yet a historic possibility. In the period from the American War of Independence of 1776 until the Paris Commune of 1871, the capitalist class could still play a historically progressive role. The wars led

by the bourgeoisie overturned outmoded feudal relations, clearing the way for the more rapid development of capitalism and of its unique product, the modern working class, the embodiment of socialised labour.

The best example of a war of this type was revolutionary war waged by the revolutionary French Republic at the end of the 18th century. The spread of the French Revolution challenged feudalism throughout Europe. Had the revolution not spread to the rest of Europe, it would have been strangled by aristocratic counter-revolution from abroad. The radical left of the time, the Jacobins, were aggressive proponents of revolutionary warfare.

Other progressive, bourgeois wars of this period included the wars of German and Italian unification, which ended the division of those countries into feudal mini-states and created unified national states and markets.

Another type of progressive war of that period was civil war to end the racial slavery. The Haitian Revolution at the beginning of the 19th century resulted in a long period of brutal warfare for human freedom from racial slavery. Similarly, the American Civil War between the Northern industrial capitalism, in alliance with the free blacks of the North and the slaves of the South, against the Southern Confederacy of capitalist plantation slave owners was a war for human liberation as well as for capitalist progress. It was one of the last acts, anywhere in the world, of the bourgeoisie as a progressive class.

To dismiss these events as limited because they were bourgeois is ahistorical. Compared to past conditions they were progressive historical developments. They created industrial capitalism whose mechanised means of production and proletarian labouring class are the preconditions for socialism. Marx and Engels decided their positions on the wars of that era based on which side's victory was a victory for historical progress, and which side represented the future interests of the working class.

Imperialism

By the beginning of the 20th century, the rise of capitalist monopolies and finance capital had laid the basis for a new stage of world capitalism, the imperialism stage, and a different era of warfare: imperialist war.

By the end of the 19th century, capitalism had broken out of the restricted limits of national economy. Competition among the major groups of capitalists, new investment outlets, markets, strategic raw materials and cheap supplies of labour-power became global.

This distinctive phase of capitalism — imperialism — has remained the life-and-

death economic imperative of the system up to the present time. The character of imperialist wars defines the reactionary nature of contemporary capitalism, and its over-ripeness for socialist transformation. Under imperialism, the immense accumulation of wealth and the technological and scientific advances of humanity, rather than serving human needs, have become the means to create surreal weapons of mass destruction.

These weapons and other “life-saving” devices of capitalism illuminate the reactionary traits of imperialist war: its propensity for historically unprecedented mass slaughter (25 million dead in World War I; 55 million dead in World War II) and the direction of this carnage at civilians. Prior to the World War I, 10% of the victims were typically civilian casualties. In both world wars and in the imperialist wars against Korea and Vietnam, the majority of those killed were civilians. These facts are the most damning indictment that this social system is a form of modern barbarism.

We oppose all imperialist wars as reactionary wars for the perpetuation and extension of the oppression and exploitation of foreign peoples..

No imperialist army, of course, marches off to war under the slogans “Higher Corporate Profits” or “Blood for Oil” on its banners. The imperialist rulers’ ideological agents — its politicians and its mass media — work overtime to convince ordinary people that the war they are fighting is against tyranny, for democracy, for defence of their families against aggression or for some other “noble” purpose that masks the true imperialist war aims and big capital’s class interests. Socialist opposition to imperialist wars often has to start with exposure of these ideological lies, establishing the real aims and politics of the war.

Defensive & aggressive wars

Modern imperialist war has an inherent contradiction, which often explodes in revolutionary fury at the end of the conflict. The imperialist ruling class often requires mass mobilisations, the mass conscription of working people into its army and heavy taxation for a war that benefits only itself. To overcome this contradiction, the imperialist rulers have to lie to their own people to gain mass support. The primary lie is: “We did not want this war. It was unavoidable, forced upon us by enemy aggression. We are only defending our nation.”

While the question of who was the aggressor may help in disproving government lies and understanding the politics of a war, war politics can’t be reduced to who is the aggressor or the most aggressive, and who is the defender. The most primitive level of this question is, “Who fired the first shot?” When war begins, all sides attempt to pin the label of aggressor on the other side, manoeuvring to make the antagonist appear

to be firing the first shot. The purpose is to manipulate public opinion into believing the claim of a war for self-defence.

The Vietnam War, for example, began with such an incident in August 1964, when the United States charged that two US naval vessels were fired upon off the coast of North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin. The US House of Representatives voted 416-0 for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave the government the authority to take any actions it deemed necessary to “defend South East Asia from communist aggression”. Five years later, the Pentagon Papers revealed that President Johnson had written this resolution months before, and had waited to introduce it until Washington could claim that it had been attacked. The Pentagon Papers further documented that the two US warships were off the coast of North Vietnam on spying and kidnapping missions. It is not clear if the North Vietnamese in fact fired on the ships. Even if they did, that fact tells us very little about what caused those shots to be fired or the policies behind the so-called “aggression”.

A more sophisticated orchestration to convince the US public of the defensive nature of Washington’s war was the plan for the launching of the US air war against North Vietnam in February 1965. The decision to bomb had been made three months earlier by Johnson and his advisers. They ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to devise a strategic plan, which they called “provocative engagement”, i.e., to stage repeated acts of provocation, covert raids against North Vietnam in the expectation that the Vietnamese would eventually retaliate. When, after months of this operation, the Vietnamese did attack a US base at Pleiku, in South Vietnam, the Pentagon began the previously planned air war, claiming it was a defence of South Vietnam from “communist aggression”.

Despite Washington’s manoeuvring for a war it wanted, had the Vietnamese been the aggressor, the underlying politics of the war would not have changed: it was a just war of national liberation on the Vietnamese part, and of imperialist conquest on the part of the US — no matter who fired first. If the political goal of the “aggressor” is just, we support the aggressor. (Marxists might in fact support an aggressive policy that results in war to gain a goal like national liberation.)

In sum, the issue of whether one side was the aggressor may tell you something about whether or not that side is lying about the claimed defensive nature of its war and may provide indications of what its real objectives are, but it cannot tell you the most important questions about the political dynamics of the war.

Wars of national liberation

The character of warfare since half of the 20th century has been marked, on the one

hand, by imperialist conquest and domination, and on the other by its dialectical opposite: wars of national liberation against imperialist conquest and domination.

The right to national self-determination is a democratic right, in which a nation determines its political fate free of foreign domination, up to and including its right to secede and set up its own sovereign state. It is a right that should be supported by all consistent democrats. Yet virtually no one other than Marxists defends national self-determination as a principle that should apply to all nations, rather than as a privilege for some nations.

An oppressed nation is entitled to self-determination no matter how undemocratic or politically backward its leadership or ruling class is. National self-determination is not socialism, and a ruling class often leads the struggle for it with all of its ruling-class faults. We Marxists make no condition that a nation should be free only if its political leaders live up to socialist standards. If a war decisively continues the struggle for national self-determination, it is a war for national liberation and we Marxists support it regardless of the political views of those leading the anti-imperialist struggle for national liberation.

The statement of Jules Humbert-Droz, a leading member of the French Communist Party to the Executive Committee of the Communist International in 1925 when Moroccan Rif peasants under the leadership of tribal and Islamic religious chief Abd el-Krim launched an armed insurrection against French colonial occupation retains certain relevance today:

The right has protested against the watchword of fraternisation with the insurgent army in the Rif, by invoking the fact that they do not have the same degree of civilisation as the French armies, and that semi-barbarian tribes cannot be fraternised with. It has gone even further, writing that Abd el-Krim has religious and social prejudices that must be fought. Doubtless we must fight the pan-Islamism and the feudalism of colonial peoples, but when French imperialism seizes the throat of the colonial peoples, the role of the CP is not to combat the prejudices of the colonial chiefs, but to fight unflinchingly the rapacity of French imperialism.⁴

As Marxists living in an imperialist country, our main enemy is at home: our own imperialist ruling class, who are junior partners in US imperialism's rapacity in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The victory of the imperialist coalition occupying Iraq would strengthen the world's most powerful gang of exploiters, whose imperative is further wars to expand its economic empire. Our main weapons must be directed against it — its propaganda, its lies, its atrocities and its war carried out in our name.

In seeking to building an antiwar movement in imperialist countries like Australia,

Marxists also have the task of political clarification. We have to argue the case for anti-imperialism, for the right of oppressed nations such as Iraq to self-determination, for international solidarity among working people, and particularly with the working people who are resisting arms-in-hand the imperialist armies that are used in our name.

The key way that we can accomplish these tasks is carry out propaganda, agitation and organising work to build the broadest mobilisations possible around the demand that our imperialist rulers get their armies out, immediately and unconditionally.

Imperialism & the ‘war on terror’

Since the emergence of imperialist capitalism, the ordering of political power among the various nation-states has shifted considerably. At the beginning of the imperialist epoch, the principal global reality was the growing rivalry among the imperialist nation-states leading to the first and second world wars. The victory of the world’s first socialist state, the Soviet Union, against Nazi Germany’s imperialist onslaught posed an external challenge to the capitalist system, leading to the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the US rulers and their imperialist allies. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the United States as the world’s sole military superpower. By the end of the 20th century, the US rulers had also made gains on their main economic rivals. The result was that at the beginning of the century, as Henry Kissinger declared in his 2001 book *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, that the US rulers had achieved “a pre-eminence not enjoyed by even the greatest of empires past”.⁵

This naturally led to the question, what were the US rulers to do with this imperial “pre-eminence”?

Back in September 1999, Dick Cheney, who was then CEO of Halliburton, the world’s largest oil services company, gave a speech to his oil industry peers at the London Institute of Petroleum, in which he noted that only about one-tenth of the world’s oil reserves were in the hands of the Western oil corporations. He went on to observe that:

While many regions of the world offer great oil opportunities, the Middle East with two-thirds of the world’s oil and the lowest cost, is still where the prize ultimately lies. Even though companies are anxious for greater access there, progress continues to be slow. It is true that technology, privatisation and the opening up of a number of countries have created many new opportunities in areas around the world for various oil companies, but looking back to the early 1990s, expectations were that significant amounts of the world’s new resources would come from such areas as the former Soviet Union and from China. Of course, that didn’t turn out quite as expected.⁶

What Cheney was alluding to was that the oil industries in Russia and China had remained in the hands of state monopolies and thus closed to the Western oil corporations. Furthermore, a considerable part of the oil resources of the Middle East, “where the prize ultimately lies”, were also closed to Big Oil, remaining in the hands of state monopolies controlled by bourgeois nationalist regimes hostile to US political and economic domination, that is the Baathist regime in Iraq and the Islamic republican regime in Iran.

How was this “ultimate prize” to be opened up to Big Oil? Cheney did not say, but in the same year that he gave his speech, Richard Haas, who had been special assistant to the president under George Bush senior and was to become Bush junior’s director of policy planning for the United States State Department until July 2003, published a book entitled *Intervention: The Use of American Military Force in the Post-Cold War World*.

Haas wrote:

Force can create a context in which political change is more likely, but without extraordinary intelligence and more than a little good fortune, force by itself is unlikely to bring about specific political changes. The only way to increase the likelihood of such change is through highly intrusive forms of intervention, such as nation-building, which involves first eliminating all opposition and then engaging in an occupation that allows for substantial engineering of another society.⁷

Such a “nation-building” occupation, Haas stressed, would require “defeating and disarming any local opposition and establishing a political authority that enjoys a monopoly or near-monopoly of control over the legitimate use of force”. It therefore requires, Haas concluded, a US occupation of “imperial proportions and possibly of endless duration”.

A year later, in November 2000, Haas delivered a paper in Atlanta entitled “Imperial America” in which he argued that “the fundamental question that continues to confront American foreign policy is what to do with a surplus of power and the many and considerable advantages this surplus confers on the United States”. This “surplus of power”, Haas argued, should be used to pursue an “imperial foreign policy ... a foreign policy that attempts to organize the world” to meet US interests. This would require convincing the majority of Americans “re-conceive their role from a traditional nation-state to an imperial power”.⁸

In the final section of his paper, which was entitled “Imperialism begins at Home”, Haas concluded that “the greatest risk facing the United States at this juncture ... is that it will squander the opportunity to bring about a world supportive of its core interests by doing too little. Imperial understretch, not overstretch, appears to be the

greater danger of the two.”

The 9/11 terrorist attacks a year later provided the US rulers with the opportunity to present their planned imperialist occupation of Iraq in terms that could rally support for it among US working people, to present it as part of a “Global War on Terror” to defend them from the threat of Islamist terrorists. The real objective of course was to carry out “regime change” in Iraq so as to enable Cheney’s Halliburton and his friends in ExxonMobil and Chevron to get control of the “ultimate prize”. As the *US Business Week* magazine explained to its corporate readership in January 2003, “Since the US military would control Iraq’s oil and gas deposits for some time, US companies could be in line for a lucrative slice of the business”, and thus they could “feel just as victorious as the US Special Forces”.

Today, almost four years later, the euphoric feeling of impending victory has been replaced by a desperate sense of frustration and despair within US ruling circles. Sustained Iraqi resistance to Washington’s imperialist occupation has produced openly acknowledged “imperial overstretch” for the US military machine and public divisions over the war among ruling-class policy makers and advisers.

In a December 6 interview Richard Haas, now president of the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations, the leading US foreign policy think tank, described the report produced by the Iraq Study Group, the bipartisan commission headed by former secretary of state and ExxonMobil legal counsellor James A. Baker III, as “refreshingly honest” for its admission that Washington’s position in Iraq is “grave and deteriorating”.

Haas said: “I can’t tell you that if the administration does everything in this report, it will succeed. But it probably gives the administration the best chance that exists for making progress.”⁹

Coming from the advocate of an occupation of “imperial proportions and possibly of endless duration” this may seem surprising, given the corporate media has peddled the idea that the Baker commission advocated the withdrawal of all US combat brigades from Iraq by early 2008. However, as Haas noted in his interview, what the Baker commission actually proposed is an acceleration of what the Pentagon is already doing, i.e., attempting to “Iraqise” Washington’s counterinsurgency war by “embedding” US soldiers as “advisers” in its puppet Iraqi security forces.

The Baker commission did indeed recommend that by “the first quarter of 2008, subject to unexpected developments in the security situation on the ground, all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq”. These combat brigades make up about 55,000 of 140,000 US troops in Iraq. The 80,000 or so US military police, the US air force, the soldiers that order, store and move supplies and

equipment, and so on are not part of the combat brigades, nor are the 4000 US soldiers currently “embedded” as “advisers” in the puppet Iraqi security forces. Under the Baker commission’s recommendations, they would all have to stay — as well as the combat troops to protect them and the extra 20,000 or so US military “advisers” that the commission recommends flood into the puppet Iraqi army. Where will these extra 20,000 “advisers” come from? They will have to be “redeployed” from the “withdrawn” combat brigades. That is, the combat brigades will be “withdrawn” from Iraq by renaming their personnel “advisers” to puppet Iraqi combat units. This is the essence of the Baker commission’s new war strategy — a Clayton’s withdrawal policy, aimed at defusing the US public’s demand for an actual withdrawal.

The same trick was pulled by Washington in Vietnam after Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in 1969. His plan to gradually withdraw US combat troops through the “Vietnamisation” of the ground war proved to be an abysmal failure, though it cost the lives of many more Vietnamese and many more US soldiers than the previous strategy.

Lessons of Vietnam War

Washington’s war against the people of Vietnam lasted 15 years. By its end in 1975, the Vietnamese had won a victory against the mightiest military power of all time. But it came at the cost of over 4 million dead.

The antiwar movement in this country and in the United States played a major role in winning that victory. It made the domestic political cost of continuing the war too high for imperialist rulers, and as I mentioned earlier, it helped politically undermine the US military as a reliable fighting force.

In 1971, when the US antiwar movement staged its largest street marches in Washington involving nearly a million participants, US Army Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr. authored a report entitled the “Collapse of the Armed Forces”, in which he concluded that:

By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous ...

All the foregoing facts ... point to widespread conditions among American Forces in Vietnam that have only been exceeded in this century by ... the collapse of the tsarist armies in 1916 and 1917.¹⁰

Although there are important differences between the guerrilla war now being waged in occupied Iraq and the high casualty war in Vietnam, there are many lessons to be

learned from the antiwar movement during the Vietnam war that can be used by the antiwar movement today.

Underlying the approach we took here to Australia's participation in the US-led war in Vietnam and our cothinkers in the Socialist Workers Party took in the United States was the Marxist view that the working class is the only class with the potential and actual power to change society.

Our approach to building the antiwar movement was oriented to mobilising the broadest masses of working people against the war. It had three basic components: (1) mass action, (2) independence from ruling-class politics and parties, and (3) principled demands on the government that respected the right of the Vietnamese people to national self-determination.

Each aspect of this approach was based on the idea that only a mass working-class movement could force the US and Australian imperialist rulers to end the war. The tactics we advocated flowed from this basic strategy. The mass actions we advocated were street demonstrations called for by non-exclusionary united fronts, that is, action committees of all who could agree to come together in common antiwar actions. We organised them to be peaceful and legal demonstrations. It was important to make it as easy as possible for ordinary working people to take their first tentative steps in publicly opposing government policy after more than a decade and half of the Cold War anti-communist hysteria aimed at demonising the left as "enemy agents".

We promoted the tactic of peaceful, legal street demonstrations because we had the confidence that the movement would be able to win a majority over to the antiwar cause, and this method would put no roadblocks in the way of that goal.

The demands we advocated for the movement likewise reflected our strategic orientation to mobilising working people. "Immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the troops", shortening into the slogan "Out now!", was the central demand we promoted in the movement.

This was in opposition to the conscious reformists in the movement, who advocated a "negotiated" solution to the war. We argued that Washington and Canberra had no right to negotiate for anything in Vietnam and that the only demand on them that respected the right of the Vietnamese people to determine their own destiny was to unconditionally withdraw the troops.

But there was another and very important reason for the slogan to get the troops out now, and that was the strategy of building the movement into a working-class movement with the social power to affect the actions of the imperialist governments waging the war. It was a concrete way of reaching out to and winning support for the movement among working people concerned about saving their conscripted relatives'

lives.

The correctness of our approach was demonstrated by the fact that the movement achieved its greatest mobilising power in 1970 and 1971, when this approach was adopted by the big antiwar coalitions. In 1971 the Liberal government of PM Billy McMahon announced that all Australian combat troops would be withdrawn by the end of that year, which is what happened.

There were some who argued that the antiwar protests had little impact on the US government. But when the Pentagon Papers were fully published in 1972 this was disproved. They exposed the fact that, as secret US State Department memorandum in March 1968 put it, “the growing disaffection [with the war] ... runs [the] great risk of provoking a domestic crisis of unprecedented proportions”.¹¹ The culmination was the US signing a peace agreement that led to brought the war to a close.

The movement against the Vietnam War of course did not prevent new and future US military interventions. Nor could it. In order to deprive the US and Australian imperialist rulers of the ability to use their military machines abroad, will require more than an antiwar movement. It will require a revolution that organises the working class as the ruling class.

While we are still a long way from this in either Australia or the US, the war of national resistance being waged by patriotic Iraqis against the imperialist occupation of their country is playing an active and important role today in assisting the advance of revolutionary working-class forces elsewhere in the world, particularly in Latin America. By tying down US imperialism’s war machine in their country and generating mass antiwar sentiment within the US working class, the Iraqi resistance fighters have created precious political space for the socialist revolution in Venezuela to advance unhindered by a US military intervention. This makes our task of continuing to build active solidarity with these fighters all the more important. ■

Their Morals & Ours

By Dave Holmes

The Big Picture

Morality is an arena of struggle

Today's class struggle poses some very hard issues. Imperialism presents us with an endless list of horrible crimes. Our world is full to the brim with unending violence, pain and suffering. But the struggle against this barbarism also confronts us with some very challenging questions.

The bourgeois media constantly bombards us with its propaganda and tells us what we should think. But it is not enough simply to reject this; we must be able to *independently* orient ourselves on all the key questions of the day.

In class society, morality is one of the arenas in which the struggle is fought. What is *our* moral code? What do we support and what do we oppose? What can or should we do and what should we not do? We need a Marxist approach to this question too.

Comrades should read the various articles in the Resistance Books collection *Their Morals and Ours* by Trotsky, Novack, Engels and Lenin.¹ They provide a clear Marxist framework for evaluating the key questions we face. In addition, *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky's 1920 polemic against Karl Kautsky, takes up some of the key issues.

This talk will briefly sketch our basic approach, then look more concretely at some contemporary issues.

Morality is class morality

Our starting point is the frank recognition that all morality is class morality and it can't be anything else. As Trotsky puts it, "morality more than any other form of ideology

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has a class character”.² We reject all notions of a supra-class morality, a morality that somehow stands above the contending social forces.

In the passage from *Anti-Dühring* appended to *Their Morals and Ours*, Engels explains that ever since the end of primitive communist society

... morality has always been class morality; it has either justified the domination and the interests of the ruling class, or, ever since the oppressed class became powerful enough, it has represented its indignation against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed.³

For us there is nothing outside of material reality. Those who say that there is some moral code or moral sense outside of that derived from the interests of specific social groups have to explain where such a code comes from.

In the Bible, Moses came down the mountain with two stone tablets from God bearing the 10 commandments. OK, this is obviously fantastic. But all claims that there is an eternal morality are really expressing religious ideas, not scientific ones. They assume the existence of a god or creator outside of the real material universe.

Ruling-class morality

Ruling-class morality is concerned with defending the interests of the bourgeoisie, that is, the interests of a tiny minority who exploit the labour of the working masses. As Trotsky explains, capitalism cannot survive through force and repression alone. “It needs the cement of morality”.⁴ Bourgeois morality has to present everything which threatens its interests as “immoral”.

It needs a morality which teaches “slavery and submission” — that is, that the division of society into social classes, into rich and poor, is natural and eternal. There is nothing ordinary people can do about it except submit to “natural” authority (i.e., accept class-divided society as it is) and struggle to survive.

James P. Cannon’s 1953 lecture, “What Socialist America Will Look Like” — which is included in our compilation *Fighting for Socialism in the ‘American Century’*⁵ — contains a section on the transformation of morality as society moves through the transition period after the revolution along the road to communism. In it Cannon gives a sharp summary of capitalist morality:

Morality which in class society is either a hypocritical cover for material self-interest, or an escapist withdrawal from the harsh realities of the class struggle, will be changed inside out. The advancement of individual special interests at the expense of others — the highest standard of capitalist society — is summed up in the slogan: “Getting Ahead” — which means, getting ahead of others. It is the root cause of lying, demagoguery, and deception, which are the central features in every election campaign, in advertising,

and in all mediums of information and communication. The people are bombarded with lies every day of their lives. Capitalist morality itself is a lie.⁶

The modern world abounds in obscene contrasts which illustrate the real ethical values of our rulers. Recent events provide a few striking examples:

- The US and its allies have poured hundreds of billions of dollars into the occupation of Iraq, completely destroying Iraqi society in the process. The millions of victims of the Asian tsunami will be lucky to receive in aid even a small fraction of what has been squandered on military conquest in the interests of the US corporate plutocracy.
- The scenes of devastation caused by the tsunami get saturation coverage in the capitalist media, right down to pictures of the countless bodies. If the same coverage was given to the carnage caused by Washington's bloody war in Iraq, it would be politically impossible for the US to continue.
- The tsunami arose from a natural geological event but the ensuing disaster is very much a social event reflecting the perverted priorities of the capitalist system. The very poverty of these Third World countries — the generally flimsy dwellings, the weak infrastructure and services — which so magnifies the effects of the disaster is ultimately a product of the ruthless depredations of Western imperialism. We can also mention the criminal failure to set up an early warning system; the widespread destruction of protective coastal mangrove swamps for commercial development; in the midst of the carnage in Aceh the regime is still devoting precious resources to prosecuting its war against the independence movement; and in Thailand the authorities apparently had some warning but — shades of Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People* — didn't pass it on for fear of wrecking the tourist industry!
- At the same time as it was mouthing off about helping the tsunami victims — now refugees in their own countries — the Australian government took advantage of the media preoccupation with the disaster to cap off its merciless years-long pursuit of the Baktiyari refugee family by deporting them to a miserable fate in Pakistan. And it then announced that it wants them to pay \$1 million for the cost of their own torment! The morality of Howard, Ruddock, Vanstone, Downer and their gang couldn't be clearer.

Morality of the future

Engels, in the excerpt appended in *Their Morals and Ours*, points out that a “really human morality which stands above class antagonism” will only be possible when social classes have withered away and even the very memory of them has disappeared — that is, under communism.

Cannon has something to say about this:

There can be no doubt whatever [he says] that the new society will have a different morality. It will be a social morality based on human solidarity, having no need of lies, deception, demagoguery, and hypocrisy. Those who cannot conceive of any human relationship without the “getting ahead” philosophy of capitalism say socialism would not “work” because people would have no incentives. They really have a low opinion of the human race. Incentives will not be lacking. But they will be different.

For one thing public opinion, uncontaminated by phony propaganda, will be a powerful force, as it was in the unspoiled primitive societies before people knew anything about private property and special class interests.⁷

Obviously, once private property, social classes and state have long gone — and with them scarcity, fear, insecurity etc. — then killing, stealing, greed, lying and the rest will disappear because they have no longer have any material basis.

Stealing, for instance, would not exist in conditions of rational abundance and the resulting absence of private property — the very concept would not exist. Killing would likewise be unknown, unless perhaps someone’s genetic template was corrupted or they accidentally swallowed some mind-deranging substance.

Proletarian morality

But here and now, socialist-proletarian morality must justify the revolt against this rotten social order and promote the struggle against it. As Trotsky puts in *Their Morals and Ours*:

Civilisation can be saved only by the socialist revolution. To accomplish the overturn, the proletariat needs all its strength, all its resolution, all its audacity, passion, and ruthlessness. Above all it must be completely free from the fictions of religion, “democracy”, and transcendental morality — the spiritual chains forged by the enemy to tame and enslave it. Only that which prepares the complete and final overthrow of imperialist bestiality is moral, and nothing else. The welfare of the revolution — that is the supreme law!⁸

So, is anything permissible? Does the end justify the means — any means? No, the end determines the means; the means cannot be in contradiction to the end. Only those actions which really lead to the liberation of humanity from capitalist barbarism are justified and moral.

Of course, these general considerations do not tell us what is or is not permissible in any given concrete case. That can only be determined by studying the actual situation. As Trotsky points out, “problems of revolutionary morality are fused with the problems of revolutionary strategy and tactics”.⁹

Confronting issues of the class struggle

I want to take some time to illustrate Trotsky's observation by looking at various confronting aspects of today's class struggle. In no case can we make sense of them from an abstract moral standpoint but rather we must assess them politically, in the context of the struggle against imperialism.

War

Firstly, let's look at the question of war. Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, a vast antiwar sentiment manifested itself around the world. This led to the unprecedented outpourings in February-March last year.

However, while this sentiment is profoundly progressive, and in this instance forced Washington to modify its plans to "shock and awe" Iraq into submission, we should be clear that we are not pacifists. Although war is, as Trotsky frankly recognises, "disgusting barbarism" and we look forward to a society without war — despite all this, some wars are progressive and justified — "moral", if you like.

- Historically, the wars fought by the rising bourgeoisie against feudalism were progressive and moved humanity forward. We can mention here the English Civil War of the 1640s which led to the defeat of the Royalists, the wars fought by revolutionary France against old Europe in the early 1790s, and the struggle waged by Lincoln's Northern Republican administration against the Southern plantation slavocracy in the US Civil War of the 1860s.
- Wars waged by oppressed peoples for their liberation from imperialist slavery are progressive and we support them. The liberation struggle of the Iraqi people is progressive and "moral".
- Revolutionary wars waged by the working class and its allies against the bourgeoisie and their imperialist backers — as in the 1918-20 civil war in Russia — are progressive.

Imperialism's 'war on terror'

Today we are the midst of the so-called "war on terror", in reality the post-Cold War ideological justification of the imperialist ruling classes for attacking the Third World and strengthening their repressive apparatus at home.

Obviously terrorist measures such as the bombing of the New York World Trade Centre or the Madrid train system should be condemned. And if the calculation of those responsible is that by killing thousands of innocent largely working-class people,

including many of their co-religionists, you will somehow intimidate the West and rouse the Muslim world to struggle, then the whole enterprise seems truly insane.

But there is a context here. Simply branding such terrorists as evil or “immoral” doesn’t advance us one bit. We have to ask *why* and *how* the phenomenon of anti-Western terrorism arose. It’s hardly a revelation to point out that it has everything to do with Western domination of the Third World, with Washington’s previously intimate relationship with today’s terrorists and so on.

Of course, from any number of angles, Washington’s “war on terror” is ludicrous. There is never any context — anti-Western Islamic terrorists are simply evil incarnate. For the Western media, terrorism only ever applies to others; by definition the West does not use terror. The invasion of Iraq is not seen as terrorism.

(A small aside here. A number of comrades might be familiar with the really excellent Penguin two-volume world historical atlas. It’s actually by two German authors. In the section on World War II, they matter-of-factly describe the Allied air campaign against German cities as “terror bombing” — which, of course, is exactly what it was.)

Opposition to terrorism not absolute

However, I think it’s important here to make the point that our opposition to terrorism is not absolute. There is terrorism and there is terrorism. In *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky defends the emergency measures of the so-called “Red terror” used against the Whites in the civil war struggle. I don’t want to go into all that here. Comrades can read Trotsky’s book, our pamphlet or Victor Serge’s book, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*.

In his polemic against Kautsky, Trotsky points out that capitalism has a history — even a revolutionary history — and at certain moments terrorism played a real role here. He uses the example of the US Civil War — in reality the second phase of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in that country — in which the northern industrial capitalist class and its popular allies confronted the slaveholding southern plantation owners. Each side used repression to intimidate and silence its internal enemies.

Lincoln’s progressive Northern Republican administration took stern measures — “terror” if you like — against its opponents. Supporters of the South were jailed in violation of Habeas Corpus, the property of rebels was seized, free speech for those not in sympathy with the government was suppressed. Yet these repressive measures had strong support from the public which was inflamed with the idea of prevailing in the struggle and willing to do whatever was necessary to achieve victory.

As one would expect, in the reactionary Southern camp a much harsher White terror reigned, with lynchings and assassinations often the fate of suspected supporters of the Union.

Terrorism ‘from below’

Throughout history, terror from the ruling class has always provoked terror from below, the killing of oppressors of the people, torturers and collaborators. Naturally in such cases, we sympathise with the avengers of the people and not their victims. But as Marxists we are opposed to such “individual terrorism” when it is employed as a *strategy* opposed to the strategy of mass action.

In his 1942 polemic with Grandizo Munis in *Socialism on Trial*, James P. Cannon clarifies what we support and what we oppose in this way:

Sabotage, to us, means individual acts of obstruction and destruction, substituted for mass action. That is the way Marxism defines it and, thereby, condemns it. Similarly, individual terrorism. But it is necessary to understand that such actions have one quality when employed as *substitutes* for mass action and another quality when subordinated to and absorbed by mass action. Marxism is opposed to terrorist assassinations, for example, but not to wars of liberation waged by the oppressed masses, even though wars entail some killing of obnoxious individuals. So, also, with acts of obstruction and destruction as *part of* and *subordinate* to wars waged by the masses, not as substitutes for them. “Terrorism” and “sabotage” are then no longer the same things. Everything changes, including the attitude of Marxists, according to what is *dominant* and what is *subordinate* in the circumstances.¹⁰

The struggle in Iraq

The struggle in Iraq with its ceaseless violence and horror has given us all plenty of things to ponder.

Of course, the media presentation of the conflict is completely distorted. Directly or indirectly the violence comes from Washington’s attempt to subjugate the country. The US spent more than a decade choking Iraq to death through the criminal sanctions regime. And in their current operation they have probably killed at least 100,000 people and maimed and traumatised many more; the whole country has been wrecked. Falluja, for instance, a city only slightly smaller than Newcastle, has been destroyed and most of its inhabitants driven out into the desert. For obvious reasons, the capitalist media chooses not to show all this — were the public in the US or Australia to be fully aware of the real level of US violence, political support for the whole project would crumble significantly.

But, having said all that, the activities of the resistance forces do raise a number of related issues about which we have to be clear. What is our attitude to the violence employed by the armed resistance? What do we think of the car bombings, suicide bombings, hostage-taking, assassinations and killing of those regarded as collaborators? Are these types of actions legitimate or in what circumstances are they legitimate?

This question is all the more challenging because of the largely conservative and often religious nature of the resistance leadership. All the more reason why we need a clear Marxist framework in which to place these issues.

Suicide bombings & car bombings

The struggle of the Iraqi resistance to the US occupation of their country is marked by the widespread use of car bombs, whether operated by suicide bombers or not.

While some of the bombings may well be the work of CIA or puppet regime forces, generally they appear to be legitimate resistance operations aimed at obvious targets (US forces, regime personnel or members of the local puppet security forces).

However, many of these bombings appear also to result in a very high level of “collateral damage”, that is, heavy casualties among ordinary Iraqi civilians. One may regret the car bomb phenomenon but the ultimate responsibility rests with the US occupiers. The car bomb is a weapon of the weak; the strong side drops bombs from the air or uses artillery.

In Palestine, as we know, the struggle has been marked by the phenomenon of the suicide bomber. While some of these operations are aimed at the Israeli military or the paramilitary settlers, others seem to indiscriminately target the civilian population. It is a weapon of desperation.

Of course, the Israeli authorities rant about “terrorism” but from people who use attack helicopters and fighter aircraft to launch missiles into crowded areas, who blow up whole buildings to kill one person on their hit list, this is the most disgusting hypocrisy.

Our basic criticisms of these suicide bombings — at least those against the Israeli civilian population — are that they are politically counterproductive (i.e., they inhibit the development of an internal Israeli opposition), they are hugely wasteful of the lives of militants, and they cut across the development of the mass struggle of the Palestinian people. Only such a political assessment makes sense; a purely moral critique — they’re wrong because they kill innocent civilians — doesn’t even begin to get to the bottom of the problem.

But in a different context, our evaluation is necessarily different.

In Spain in 1936, for example, when Franco’s forces rose in revolt against the

popularly elected republican government, sheer mass heroism by the poorly armed people crushed the military uprisings in the big cities. Fascist machine-gun nests were destroyed by driving taxis at them at full speed — a form of “suicide bombing” perhaps but in this case an absolutely integral part of the genuinely mass struggle.

And in the desperate fighting on the Eastern Front in World War II, I’m sure many comrades have read accounts of Red soldiers loaded with grenades heroically flinging themselves under Nazi tanks. In this case, such self-sacrificing “suicide” operations were simply an aspect of the overall mass armed struggle against the fascist invaders.

Hostage-taking

The fighting in Iraq has given much prominence to the issue of hostage-taking. Again, this question cannot be appraised independently of the overall struggle. Washington is responsible for the devastation of Iraqi society and ultimately it has created the conditions for the wave of kidnappings of foreigners.

Whatever we might think of the images of generally low-level hostages facing death if their governments do not withdraw from Iraq, realistically such actions are unlikely to disappear as long as the US continues to occupy the country. Brutalised by the imperialist occupation, the masses are not likely to play by Marquis of Queensberry rules. The best way for foreign governments to protect their nationals is to get their forces out of Iraq immediately and stop supporting the US neocolonial project in any way whatsoever.

Again, however, it’s worth remembering that we are not opposed to the taking of hostages as such. It all depends on who is doing it, what for, and the overall context.

1. The Paris Commune of 1871 took hostages in an attempt to stop the killing of their fighters captured by the bourgeois Versailles regime. Before the fall of the city, they executed 64 of them, headed by the archbishop of Paris. The bourgeois press went into a frenzy against this action but Marx defended it in his famous pamphlet, *The Civil War in France*:

When Thiers [the leader of the reactionary forces] ... from the very beginning of the conflict, enforced the humane practice of shooting down the Communal prisoners, the Commune, to protect their lives, was obliged to resort to the Prussian practice of securing hostages. The lives of the hostages had been forfeited over and over again by the continued shooting of prisoners on the part of the Versaillese. How could they be spared any longer after the carnage with which MacMahon’s praetorians celebrated their entrance into Paris? Was even the last check upon the unscrupulous ferocity of bourgeois governments — the taking of hostages — to be made a mere sham of? The real murderer of Archbishop Darboy is Thiers. The Commune again and again had

offered to exchange the archbishop, and ever so many priests in the bargain, against the single Blanqui, then in the hands of Thiers. Thiers obstinately refused. He knew that with Blanqui he would give to the Commune a head; while the archbishop would serve his purpose best in the shape of a corpse.¹¹

2. In the Russian Civil War, following a 1919 decree, the Reds systematically took hostages from the families of tsarist military specialists serving with them as a guarantee against betrayal to the Whites. However, as Trotsky points out in *Their Morals and Ours*, scarcely a single hostage was executed on account of such treachery, despite the fact that it did occur and cost thousands of lives and great suffering.

3. On July 31, 1970, the Tupamaros urban guerrilla group in Uruguay kidnapped US torture specialist Dan Mitrione, who was training the local police in torture techniques. His captors demanded that the government release 150 jailed militants. Backed by the Nixon administration, the Uruguayan government refused and the Tupamaros executed Mitrione; his body was found on August 10.

He was given a hero's funeral back in the United States. But Mitrione was a monster, an imperialist technician of repression. He had a soundproof basement under his house in Montevideo where he tortured at least four beggars to death to demonstrate his techniques to selected cops.

The kidnapping formed the basis for Costa-Gavras' outstanding 1973 film *State of Siege*. Yves Montand starred as the captured torturer facing popular justice.

4. Finally, in Nicaragua on August 22, 1978 (about a year before the successful 1979 revolution) a 26-person FSLN commando unit seized the National Palace in Managua. The entire House of Deputies along with hundreds of other people were taken hostage. Such a large section of Somoza's clique and key personnel were captured that the dictatorship had no choice but to negotiate with the rebels.

The FSLN's key demands were the freeing of over 100 of their jailed militants and safe conduct out of the country. After a 45-hour siege, the rebels and their key hostages were driven to the airport. All along the 12-kilometre route, thousands of supporters cheered them on and escorted their bus. No one was killed in this operation although many of the prisoners whose release was demanded had already been killed in Somoza's prisons. Overall, the operation was a great success.

In March of that same year the FSLN had kidnapped one of Somoza's most notorious generals and demanded the release of more than 60 Sandinista prisoners. Somoza refused and the general was executed, the only time in the FSLN's history that one of their hostages had been killed.

Comrades can read about all this in George Black's excellent 1981 history of the revolution, *Triumph of the People*.

Assassinations

The Iraqi resistance has assassinated a number of prominent members of the puppet regime. But again, assassination has to be seen in its context. Furthermore, the West cannot plausibly oppose the practice as such since it has frequently resorted to it.

For instance, in a well-known episode during World War II, in 1942, a British-trained team of Czech exiles was parachuted into Czechoslovakia to kill Reinhard Heydrich, the deputy head of the Gestapo who was responsible for Bohemia and Moravia. Their success in May of that year sparked brutal reprisals by the Nazis — in June the village of Lidice was razed, almost 200 men were executed, some 200 women were sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp and 100 children dispersed, many to their deaths.

Was the assassination justified? The British authorities obviously thought so; in fact, they must have known the sort of repression the success of their attempt would lead to. (Heydrich's assassination is the subject of Lewis Gilbert's 1976 movie, *Operation Daybreak*, starring Timothy Bottoms and Antony Andrews.)

Sections of the US ruling class obviously believe that assassination is an effective way to deal with its political problems, both at home and abroad. The Kennedy assassination and the later killings of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King all most likely involved elements of various state agencies.

And it is an officially documented fact that the US organised numerous attempts on Fidel Castro's life.

In 2004 Cuba broke off diplomatic relations with Panama after the outgoing president pardoned four Cuban terrorists jailed for a 2000 plot to kill Fidel during his visit to that country. Strangely, the presidential pardons were granted shortly after Colin Powell visited Panama. Three of the freed criminals went off to Miami where they were feted by the anti-Cuban mafia.

The other released terrorist, the notorious Luis Posada Carriles, had in 1985 escaped from a Venezuelan jail where he was serving time for organising the 1976 midair bombing of a Cuban airliner, which resulted in the deaths of 73 people.

What about assassinations by those fighting oppression? Can they be justified? Again, the yardstick is that set out by Trotsky and Cannon. All those actions which promote the mass struggle are good, those which retard it are bad.

On December 20, 1973, in Madrid, the Basque terrorist group ETA (V) assassinated Franco's prime minister and main henchman, Admiral Carrero Blanco. (Technically the operation was spectacular. His vehicle was blown right over the top of a nearby church and landed in a street on the other side.) While we can be sure that the masses didn't shed any tears on account of this notorious regime figure getting his just desserts,

did the action drive forward the struggle? At the time, we criticised it as a classic case of individual terrorism counterposed to the strategy of mass action.

On May 27, 1990, a unit of the Provisional IRA executed two male Australian tourists sitting with their female partners at an outdoor table in Roermond in the Netherlands in the belief that they were off-duty British soldiers. In fact, the tourists had absolutely zero connection with the struggle in Ireland. The IRA apologised for their mistake. (On October 26 the year before, an IRA attack in Germany had killed a British soldier and his child. The IRA apologised for killing the child.)

The Roermond operation was a truly spectacular and horribly fascinating tragedy. Two completely innocent people were dead and the lives of those who survived them were shattered. The media, especially in Australia, went into a predictable frenzy of anti-IRA propaganda. But at the end of the day, what can one say? That the IRA killers were criminals and moral degenerates? That approach doesn't even begin to get to the heart of the matter. The incident can only be appraised politically, not morally.

British oppression and violence in Northern Ireland have created resistance. The Irish nationalists have every right to take up arms to defend themselves against the oppressors and their Loyalist allies. But the IRA adopted a militarist strategy which prioritised armed actions over politically mobilising the masses. In this context, tragedies like Roermond were inevitable and merely gave the British and Australian media a field day for their pro-imperialist hypocrisy.

Killing of collaborators

The Iraqi insurgency has been marked by sustained attacks against police, national guard forces and officials of the puppet regime. The US and its lackeys choose to call this "terrorism". Yes, it is terrorism but, as we have seen, this term covers a lot of ground and embraces both the justifiable and the unjustifiable.

One can certainly question a strategy which focuses on killing ordinary police or national guards when clearly most are simply trying to survive economically in a ruined country and have shown no real inclination to fight for the US occupiers. However, putting aside the question of whether such attacks are politically expedient, we can point out that attacks on those regarded as collaborators or quislings have often featured in armed uprisings including some which the bourgeoisie has applauded and celebrated. Here is simply one example.

In April 1943, in Nazi-occupied Poland, the Jews remaining in the Warsaw Ghetto, faced with the choice of dying of starvation or deportation to certain death — and inspired by the great victories of the Red Army — began a desperate and heroic uprising. It has justly been commemorated in books such as Leon Uris' best-selling

novel *Mila 18* and the film of the same name. When the Jewish Fighting Organisation which led the revolt was constituted, its charter included the following:

A terrorist campaign will be initiated against the Jewish police, Jewish communal leaders [i.e., against collaborators] and the Werkschutz [factory police].

To protect Jewish masses active combat will be conducted against shop administrators and foremen, the open and secret Gestapo agents.

The charter called for “an overall campaign plan for sabotage and terrorism”.¹² Without eliminating the eyes and ears of the repressive apparatus, how could the uprising have any hope of success?

Death penalty

Finally in this section, let’s look at the death penalty. Like all violence and killing — even in a justified cause — it can rightly be considered barbaric. We are opposed to it under capitalism and in a normally functioning workers state there would be no death penalty. Indeed, as society moves towards communism, as classes wither away so will the state and all aspects of state repression. They will end up in history’s rubbish bin. This is what socialists are fighting for.

We have before us today the particularly horrible example of the United States, the self-appointed champion of “human rights”, where at the end of 2003 some 6.9 million people — 1 in every 32 US adults — were either in prison or in the coils of the “criminal justice” system (i.e., on probation or parole). In mid-2003, the per capita imprisonment rate of the leader of the “free world” was the highest in the world — it was, for example, three times that of Iran and *seven times* that of Germany!

The death penalty is a key part of the whole system. It serves to terrorise the population. But it is so biased against the poor and coloured, it is so unjust, so much the tool of the police and corrupt judges and prosecutors that there is growing disquiet.

For example, in the state of Illinois, so many people had been proved innocent after being sentenced to death, that in January 2003 the outgoing Republican governor commuted the sentences of all death-row prisoners, even though he personally favoured the death penalty!

But our opposition to the death penalty cannot be absolute or based on abstract moral grounds. Otherwise we would be pacifists, not Marxists. One can argue against capital punishment but the only valid grounds for us can be those of political expediency — i.e., does it advance the cause or not.

Before they took power, the Bolsheviks demanded the abolition of the death penalty. The new Soviet regime at first delivered on this demand and abolished capital punishment. But in the face of the developing counter-revolution it was forced to

reinstate it.

In *Terrorism and Communism* Trotsky defends the use of the death penalty in the civil war context. As he explains to Kautsky, in a civil war each side expects to be victorious. Imprisonment will not deter hardened fighters since they expect to be liberated before too long. Hence the widespread resort to shootings by both sides to intimidate and break the will of their opponents. However, the Whites, representing a small minority of society, necessarily had to carry out a far more widespread and atrocious repression than the Reds. Repression played a part in the Soviet victory but a subordinate one. (You can read about this in Victor Serge's *Year One of the Russian Revolution*.)

In April 2003 the Cuban government executed three convicted boat hijackers. This hijacking came in the midst of a wave of plane and boat takeovers and attempted and planned takeovers. This action created a storm of controversy among defenders of the Cuban revolution with prominent figures like Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn speaking out against it. Many others — such as James Petras — defended the action.

Cuba is engaged in a life and death struggle with US imperialism, even if it's not a shooting war at the moment. They cannot afford to abolish the death penalty, even though for political and other reasons they may choose to use it sparingly (and they do, especially compared to the US).

Furthermore, in the face of a real offensive by Washington using the visa issue, if the Cuban authorities had not drawn a firm line in the sand, there was a real danger that their own supporters among the population would have become demoralised.

'In the fight and for the fight'

In conclusion, I want to take up some of the more personal issues of commitment in the struggle. What should we do here and now, today, in Australia? What should be our fundamental code of conduct?

In *Their Morals and Ours* Trotsky remarks of Lenin:

The "amoralism" of Lenin, that is, his rejection of supra-class morals, did not hinder him from remaining faithful to one and the same ideal throughout his whole life; from devoting his whole being to the cause of the oppressed ... Does it not seem that "amoralism" in the given case is only a pseudonym for higher human morality?¹³

This should be our moral yardstick too. Whether we are workers, students, full-timers, coping with family responsibilities or health problems — whatever our personal

circumstances, above all this, above everything else — we are fighters for a cause, we are soldiers of the revolution and socialism. That is the way each of us should see ourselves.

Although at the moment in Australia we aren't risking our lives, being a socialist activist in a rich country is not always easy. We are bombarded with all the propaganda of capitalist society — compete, look after No. 1, climb the greasy pole, get ahead and make a career; happiness is supposed to come from consuming an endless array of commodities or sampling all the attractions of the capitalist leisure industry.

Even if we understand how false all this is at bottom, it can sometimes get to us or we can start to feel a crisis of relevance — does anyone listen, will we ever succeed and so on?

But the capitalist dream factory is selling shoddy goods. They won't bring us real happiness. Fundamentally, the only way to escape an alienated existence in this society is to understand what's wrong and join in the struggle to change it.

Trotsky put it this way in a recorded message to an October 28, 1938 meeting in New York celebrating the founding of the Fourth International and the 10th anniversary of the American Trotskyist movement:

Our party demands each of us, totally and completely. Let the philistines hunt their own individuality in empty space. For a revolutionary to give [oneself] entirely to the party signifies finding [oneself].

Yes, our party takes each one of us wholly. But in return it gives to every one of us the highest happiness: the consciousness that one participates in the building of a better future, that one carries on [one's] shoulders a particle of the fate of [humanity], and that one's life will not have been lived in vain.¹⁴

These are challenging times, comrades. There is the global situation, with unprecedented dangers facing the human race — the ecological crisis, the appalling poverty and suffering, and imperialist militarism gone mad and now we can add, natural disasters intensified qualitatively by an inhuman social system which puts people's needs a distant second to corporate greed.

And right here, in our own country, the DSP is embarked on a great project which has the potential to radically widen our field of operations and create immensely more rewarding possibilities for the further development of the revolutionary socialist current.

Paradoxically, this project has dramatically increased the pressure on the DSP and we are under considerable strain as a result. However, while this situation is serious and will not be reversed without great effort, I think we should feel some confidence in the ultimate result.

We have great political resources. And our greatest resource is our cadre, the Marxist understanding of our comrades and their commitment, capacity for self-sacrifice and discipline. Each of us should clearly understand the stakes and resolve to do our utmost to contribute to the overcoming of our problems.

To conclude, I'd like to give the last words to James P. Cannon. They are from the final section of his political report to the October 1942 convention of the Socialist Workers Party. It was given in the midst of World War II, with 18 party leaders and militants facing jail terms for their opposition to the imperialist slaughter. A number of SWP members in the party's large maritime fraction had already perished in the wartime ocean convoys. In Europe the war was raging, the Trotskyist movement was underground, and a number of its leaders had fallen victim to the Nazis. Cannon sought to steel and inspire the party for what was ahead.

But with all allowances made for the differences in time and place, I think that his words — with their emphasis on staunchness in the struggle and faith in the future — speak no less strongly to us today than they did then.

Ah, but the faint hearts say, American imperialism is so rich, is so strong; who dares to challenge it? We do. We dare. We see not only its strength; we see also its internal weakness, its hopeless contradictions. We see the historic doom that has already been pronounced upon this imperialist monster. We know that this is their day, but we also know, with no less certainty, that tomorrow is our day. Our enemies are strong but our program, our cadres, our discipline are stronger and will prevail.

We are inspired in our fight by the most completely self-justifying, the most powerful driving incentive that has ever been known — our faith in [humanity] and [its] grandiose communist future. Whatever may befall any of us individually, participation in the fight for the communist future of [humanity] is the only justifiable life in this epoch, the happiest and the most satisfying life. Whether we as individuals take part in the final victory ... or whether some of us as individuals perish in the fight that is not of much consequence. That is only the soldier's hazard, it is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that we live in the fight and for the fight. Let all the other things take care of themselves.¹⁵ ■

Notes

War, Imperialism & Revolution

- 1 V.I. Lenin (and G.Y. Zinoviev), “Socialism 1 and War”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21 (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964), p. 299. 2
- 2 V.I. Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second 3 International”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, p. 219. 4
- 3 V.I. Lenin, “War and Revolution”, 5 *Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964), p. 398.
- 4 Cited in “Marxists and Religion — yesterday 6 and today” by Gilbert Achcar, *International 7 Viewpoint*, March 2005.
- 5 Cited in “Imperial America and War” by John 9 Bellamy Foster, *Monthly Review* May 2003.
- 6 Richard Cheney, Speech at the Institute of 10 Petroleum, Autumn 1999. Available at 11 www.petroleum.co.uk/speeches.htm.
- 7 Cited in “Imperial America and War”, by 12 John Bellamy Foster, *Monthly Review*, May 2003.
- 8 *Foreign Affairs*, November 11, 2000.
- 9 Interview with Richard Haas, Council on 10 Foreign Relations website (www.cfr.org/publication/12187/haass.html).
- 10 Robert J. Heinl, Jr, “The Collapse of the Armed 11 Forces”, *Armed Forces Journal*, June 7, 1971.
- 11 *The Pentagon Papers* (Beacon Press, 12 Boston, 1972), Vol. IV, p. 564.

Their Morals & Ours

- 1 Trotsky et al, *Their Morals and Ours* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 2000).
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 5 Cannon, *Fighting for Socialism in the 6 ‘American Century’* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 2000).
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 9 Trotsky et al, *Their Morals and Ours*, p. 50.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 11 Cannon, *Socialism on Trial* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 1999), pp. 154-155.
- 12 Marx, *The Class Struggles in France* (Resistance Books: Chippendale, 2003), p. 275.
- 13 Ber Mark, *Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto* (Schocken Books, New York, 1975), p. 114.
- 14 Trotsky et al, *Their Morals and Ours*, p. 34.
- 15 Trotsky, *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1938-39)* (Pathfinder Press: New York, second edition, 1974), p. 86.
- 16 Cannon, *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1975), p. 265.

In late capitalist society, war and violent social conflict are endemic. The corporate mass media constantly pumps out the official line, identifying the enemy, justifying imperialism's latest war and hyping up the surreal 'war on terror'.

In order to resist the veritable barrage of Orwellian propaganda, we need to have an independent framework for approaching the various issues of the modern class struggle.

The two talks presented in this pamphlet look at such vexed questions as war, pacifism and terrorism and provide a clear Marxist approach for assessing them.

For example, the wars waged by imperialism for conquest and plunder should be opposed. But what about the wars of liberation waged by the oppressed. Clearly, different criteria apply in the two cases.

Resistance books