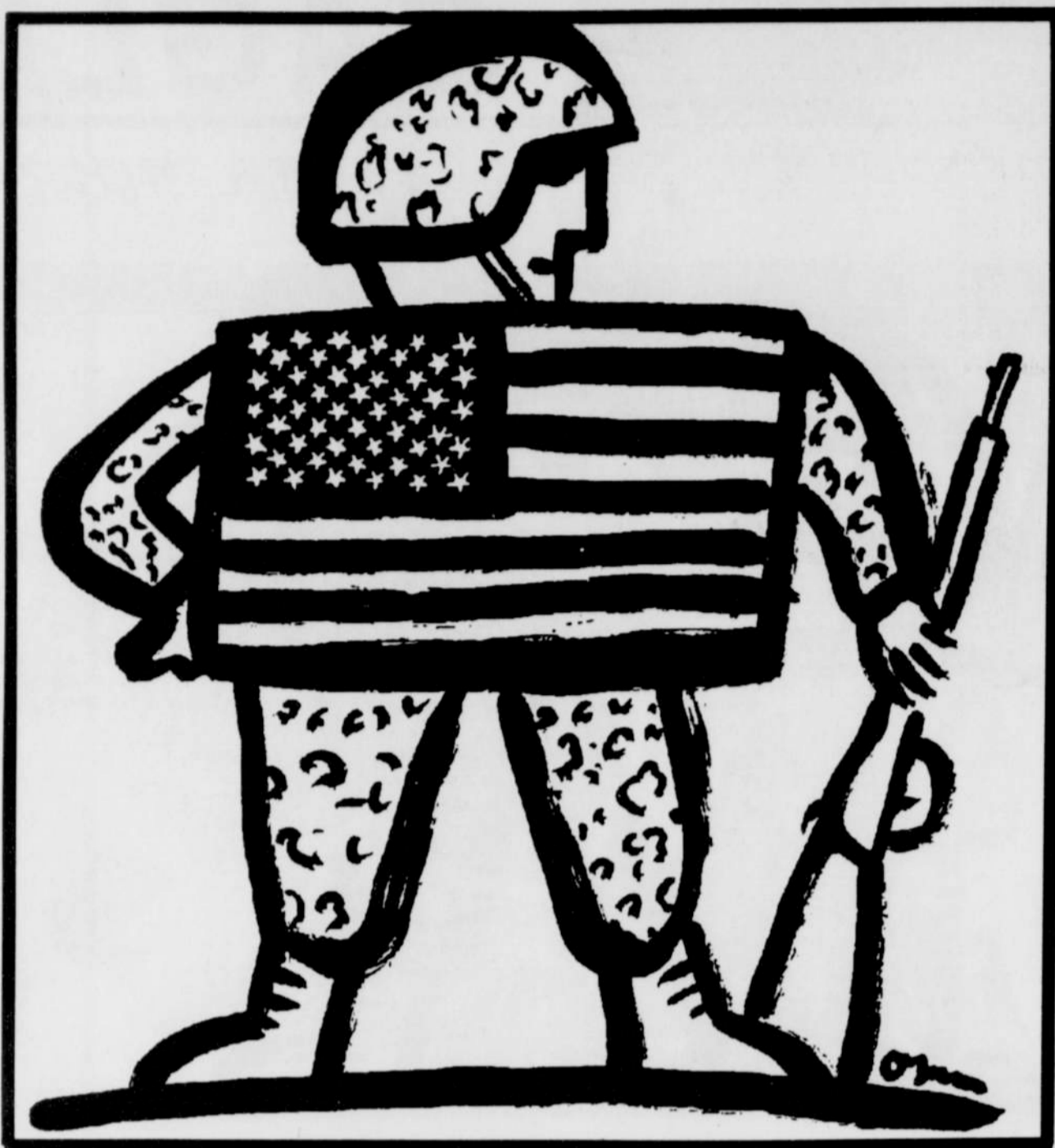


THE BASES OF WAR



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BY ZOLTAN GROSSMAN

Since the end of the Cold War a decade ago, the U.S. has gone to war in Iraq, Somalia, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. The interventions have been promoted as "humanitarian" deployments to stop aggression, to topple dictatorships, or to halt terrorism. After each U.S. intervention, the attention of supporters and critics alike has turned to speculate on which countries would be next. But largely ignored has been what the U.S. interventions left behind.

As the Cold War ended, the U.S. was confronted with competition from two emerging economic blocs in Europe and East Asia. Though it was considered the world's last military superpower, the United States was facing a decline of its economic strength relative to the European Union and the East Asian economic bloc of Japan, China and the Asian "Four Tigers." The U.S. faced the prospect of being economically left out in much of the Eurasian landmass. The major U.S. interventions since 1990 should be viewed as not only reactions to "ethnic cleansing" or against Islamist militancy, but to this new geopolitical picture.

Since 1990, each large-scale U.S. intervention has left behind a string of new U.S. military bases in a region where the U.S. had never before had a foothold. The U.S. military is inserting itself into strategic areas of the world and anchoring U.S. geopolitical influence in these areas at a very critical time in history. With the rise of the "euro bloc" and "yen bloc," U.S. economic power is perhaps on the wane. But in military affairs, the U.S. is still the unquestioned superpower. It has been projecting that military dominance into new strategic regions as a future counterweight to its economic competitors, to create a military-backed "dollar bloc" as a wedge geographically situated between its major competitors.

As each intervention was being planned, war planners focused on building new U.S. military installations, or securing basing rights at foreign facilities, in order to support the coming war. But after the war ended the U.S. forces did not withdraw, but stayed behind, often creating suspicion and resentment among local populations such as the Soviet forces faced after liberating Eastern Europe in World War 2. The new U.S. military bases were not merely built to aid the interventions, but the interventions also conveniently afforded an opportunity to station the bases.

Indeed, the establishment of new bases may in the long run be more critical to U.S. war planners than the wars themselves, as well as to enemies of the U.S. The massacre of September 11 was not directly tied to the Persian Gulf War; Osama bin Laden had backed the Saudi fundamentalist dictatorship against the Iraqi secular dictatorship in the war. The attacks had their roots in the U.S. decision to leave behind bases in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The permanent stationing of new U.S. forces in and around the Balkans and Afghanistan could easily generate a similar terrorist "blowback" years from now.

This is not to say that all U.S. wars of the past decade have been the result of some coordinated conspiracy to make Americans the overlords of the belt between Bosnia and Pakistan. But it is to recast the interventions as opportunistic responses to events, which have enabled Washington to gain a foothold in the "middle ground" between Europe to the west, Russia to the north and China to the east, and turn this region increasingly into an American "sphere of influence." The series of interventions have also virtually secured U.S. corporate control over the oil supplies for both Europe and East Asia. It's not a conspiracy; it's just business as usual.

Contrary to original U.S. promises to its Arab allies, the 1991 Gulf War left behind large military bases in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and basing rights in the other Gulf states of Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. The war also heightened the profile of existing U.S. air bases in Turkey. The war completed the American inheritance of the oil region from which the British had withdrawn in the early 1970s. Yet

the U.S. itself only imports about 5% of its oil from the Gulf; the rest of the oil is exported mainly to Europe and Japan. French President Jacques Chirac correctly viewed the U.S. role in the Persian Gulf as securing control over oil sources for the European and East Asian economic powers. The U.S. decided to permanently station bases around the Gulf after 1991 not only to counter Saddam Hussein and support the continuing bombing against Iraq, but to quell potential internal dissent in the oil-rich monarchies.

The intervention in Somalia in 1992-93 ended in defeat for the U.S., but it is important to understand why the so-called "humanitarian" intervention took place. In the 1970s-80s, the U.S. backed Somali dictator Siad Barre in his war against Soviet backed Ethiopia. In return, Barre had granted the U.S. Navy the rights to use Somali naval ports which were strategically situated at the southern end of the Red Sea, linking the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean. After Barre was overthrown, the U.S. used the ensuing chaos and famine as its excuse to move back in, but made the mistake of siding with one group of warlords against the Mogadishu warlord Mohamed Aidid. In the battle of Mogadishu, romanticized in the movie "Black Hawk Down," 18 U.S. troops and many hundreds of Somalis were killed. The U.S. withdrew and eventually gained naval basing rights in the port of Aden, just across the Red Sea in Yemen, where Osama bin Laden launched his attack on the *USS Cole* in 2000.

The U.S. interventions in Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999 were ostensibly reactions to Serbian "ethnic cleansing," yet the U.S. had not intervened to prevent similar ethnic cleansing by its Croatian or Albanian allies in the Balkans. The U.S. military interventions in former Yugoslavia resulted in new U.S. military bases in five countries: Hungary, Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, and the sprawling Camp Bondsteel complex in southern Kosovo. NATO allies have also participated in the interventions, though not always with the same political priorities. As in the Gulf and Afghan conflicts, European Union allies may be joining the U.S. wars not simply out of solidarity, but out of fear of being completely excluded from carving out the postwar order in the region. The Kosovo intervention in particular was followed by stepped-up European efforts to form an independent military force outside the U.S.-commanded NATO. The U.S. stationing of huge bases along the eastern edge of the E.U., which can be used to project forces into the Middle East, was carried out partly in anticipation of European militaries one day going their own way.

The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan was ostensibly a reaction to September 11, and to some extent was aimed at toppling the Taliban. But Afghanistan has historically been in an extremely strategic location straddling South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. The country also conveniently lies along a proposed Unocal oil pipeline route from the Caspian Sea oil fields to the Indian Ocean. The U.S. had already been situating forces in the neighboring ex-Soviet republic of Uzbekistan before September 11. During the war it has used new bases and basing rights in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent Tajikistan. It is using the continuing instability in Afghanistan (like in Somalia, largely a result of setting warlords against warlords) as an excuse to station a permanent military presence throughout the region, and it even plans to institute the dollar as the new Afghan currency. This new string of U.S. military bases are becoming permanent outposts guarding a new Caspian Sea oil infrastructure.

Geopolitical priorities may help explain why Washington went to war in all these countries, even as paths to peace remained open. President George Bush launched the February 1991 ground war against Iraq, even though Saddam Hussein was already withdrawing from Kuwait under a Soviet disengagement plan. He also sent forces into Somalia in 1992 even though the famine he used as a justification had already lessened. President Clinton launched a war on Serbia in 1999 to force a withdrawal from Kosovo even though Yugoslavia had already met many of his withdrawal terms. President George W. Bush attacked Afghanistan in 2001 without having put much diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to surrender Bin Laden or letting anti-Taliban forces (such as Pashtun commander Abdul Haq) win

over Taliban forces on their own. Washington went to war not as a last resort, but because it saw war as a convenient opportunity to further larger goals.

Geopolitical priorities may also help explain the reluctance of the U.S. to declare victory in these wars. If the U.S. had ousted Saddam Hussein from power in 1991 its Gulf allies would have demanded the withdrawal of U.S. bases, but his continued hold onto power justifies intensive U.S. bombing of Iraq and a continued hold over the Gulf oil region. The fact that Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar have not been captured in nearly a year of war also provides convenient justification for the permanent stationing of U.S. bases in Central and South Asia. All three men are more useful to U.S. plans if they are alive and free, at least for the time being.

Iraq is certainly the primary target for a new war by the U.S. for President Bush Jr. to "finish the job" that his father left unfinished. Now that the American sphere of influence is taking hold in the "middle ground" between Europe and East Asia, the attention may be turned on both Iraq and its former enemy Iran as the only remaining regional powers to stand in the way. Bush may be under the illusion that Iraqi opposition forces can be refashioned into a pro-U.S. force like the Northern Alliance or Kosovo Liberation Army. He may also be under the illusion that his threats against Iran will help Iranian "moderate" reformers, even though it is already dangerously strengthening the hand of Islamist hard-liners. A U.S. war against either Iran or Iraq will destroy any bridges recently built to Islamic states, especially as Bush also abandons even the pretense of even-handedness between Israelis and Palestinians.

U.S. war planners are also openly targeting Somalia and Yemen and are patrolling their shores with Navy ships, though they may decide to intervene indirectly to avoid the disasters of Mogadishu in 1993 and Aden in 2000. Bin Laden had backed warlord Aidid to prevent U.S. bases in Somalia, and his father is from the historically rebellious Hadhramaut region of southeast Yemen. Yet Washington's priority would not be to eliminate Bin Laden's influence, leaving that role to local forces. Rather the priority would be to regain naval access to strategic Somali and Yemeni ports.

The most direct U.S. intervention since the Afghanistan invasion has been in the southern Philippines against the Moro (Muslim) guerrilla militia Abu Sayyaf. The U.S. sees the tiny Abu Sayyaf group as inspired by Bin Laden rather than a thuggish outgrowth of decades of Moro insurgency in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. U.S. special forces "trainers" carry out joint "exercises" with Philippine troops in the active combat zone. Their goal may be to achieve an easy Grenada-style victory over the 200 rebels for the global propaganda effect against Ben Laden. But once in place, the counterinsurgency campaign could easily be redirected against other Moro or even communist rebel groups in Mindanao. It could also help achieve the other major U.S. goal in the Philippines: to fully reestablish U.S. military basing rights, which ended when the Philippine Senate terminated U.S. control of Clark Air Base and Subic Navy Base after the Cold War ended and a volcanic eruption damaged both bases. Such a move back into the country would be strongly resisted by both leftist and rightist Filipino nationalists.

The U.S. return to the Philippines, like Bush's newest threats against North Korea, may also be an effort to assert U.S. influence in East Asia as China rises as a global power and other Asian economies recover from financial crises. A growing U.S. military role throughout Asia could counteract increasing criticism of U.S. bases in Japan. The moves could also raise fears in China of a U.S. sphere of influence intruding on its borders. The new U.S. air base in the ex-Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan is too close to China for comfort. (Russian fears of U.S. encirclement may also be rekindled, though Russia may instead join the U.S. in using its oil to lessen the power of OPEC.)

Meanwhile other regions of the world are also being targeted in the U.S. "War on Terror," notably South America. Just as Cold War propaganda recast leftist rebels in South Vietnam and El Salvador as puppets of North Vietnam or Cuba, U.S. war on terror propaganda is casting Colombian rebels as the allies of neighboring oil-rich Venezuela. The beret-clad Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is described loosely as sympathetic to Bin Laden and Fidel Castro, and as possibly turning OPEC against the U.S. Chavez could serve as an ideal new enemy if Bin Laden is eliminated. The crisis in South America, though it cannot be tied to Islamic militancy, may be the most dangerous new war in the making.

Whether we look at the U.S. wars of the past decade in the Persian Gulf, Somalia, the Balkans or Afghanistan, or at the possible new wars in Yemen, the Philippines, Colombia/Venezuela or even at Bush's new "Axis of Evil" of Iraq, Iran and North Korea, the same common themes arise. The U.S. military interventions cannot all be tied to the insatiable U.S. thirst for oil (or rather for oil profits), even though many of the recent wars do have their roots in oil politics. They can nearly all be tied to the U.S. desire to build or rebuild military bases. The new U.S. military bases and increasing control over oil supplies can in turn be tied to the historical shift taking place since the 1980s: the rise of European and East Asian blocs that have the potential to replace the United States and Soviet Union as the world's economic superpowers.

Much as the Roman Empire tried to use its military power to buttress its weakening economic and political hold over its colonies, the United States is aggressively inserting itself into new regions of the world to prevent its competitors from doing the same. The goal is not to end "terror" or encourage "democracy," and Bush will not accomplish either of these claimed goals. The short-term goal is to station U.S. military forces in regions where local nationalists had evicted them. The long-term goal is to increase U.S. corporate control over the oil needed by Europe and East Asia, whether the oil is in around the Caspian or Caribbean Seas. The ultimate goal is to establish new American spheres of influence and eliminate any obstacles — religious militants, secular nationalists, enemy governments, or even allies — who stand in the way.

U.S. citizens may welcome the interventions to defend the "homeland" from attack or even to build new bases or oil pipelines to preserve U.S. economic power. But as the dangers of this strategy become more apparent, Americans may begin to realize that they are being led down a risky path that will turn even more of the world against them, and lead inevitably to future September 11s.

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