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Decline and change

# Balance-sheet of U.S. imperialism

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**In this interview with 'La Breche', Gilbert Achcar explains the decline of US imperialism, from the 'hyperpower' fantasy of 1991 to the change reflected by the presidential campaign of Barack Obama.**

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Coburn\\_and\\_Obama\\_greet\\_Bush.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Coburn_and_Obama_greet_Bush.jpg)]

**Barack Obama and Tom Coburn greet President Bush**

Wikimedia

**THE DISASTER that marks the end of the Republican administration of George W. Bush reinvigorates the discussion of the status of the United States, whether it is a “hyperpower” or in decline. Can you provide perspective on this debate?**

THE CONCEPT of “hyperpower,” attributed to Hubert Védrine, former foreign minister of the French government under Lionel Jospin (1997–2002), describes the image of the United States such as it appeared following the first war with Iraq in 1991. This concept looks back to the emergence of a “unipolar world” with the increasing paralysis of the Soviet Union, then its disappearance—“or rather of a “unipolar moment” according to the more precise expression of the American neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer.

The year 1991 was a turning point, a year fraught with symbols because there were real changes: not only the collapse of the USSR, but also the first Gulf War, which was a defining moment in the configuration of the post–Cold War period. Indeed, the United States concretely demonstrated the power of the military force that was built up during the Reagan era—“from 1981 to 1989, a period during which military expenditure was the highest in the history of the United States, except for years of war.

The 1991 war was also part of demonstrating to U.S. allies that “the obliteration of communism” would not imply that they could do without American military force, and even less so since there were indeed very significant threats of international destabilization. The role of “American gendarme” has not decreased; in a certain sense, it’s been reinforced, because full-scale military interventions are presented as a “democratic” requirement for “peace.” The same period saw the proliferation of expressions like “global cop”—“or “globocop”—“alluding to a popular film. This last term was on the cover of one of the major American weekly magazines.

The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in August 1990 was used by the American administration to return and establish itself militarily in this region of the world, which it had had to leave at the beginning of the 1960s (with the evacuation of the American base of Dhahran in the Saudi kingdom under pressure from Nasser’s Egypt). The United States reinstalled itself in force in this zone whose strategic importance, because of oil and geopolitical concerns, does not escape anyone. Control of this space is used as a strategic argument in relations with their partners who depend on Middle Eastern oil, whether it’s Western Europe or Japan, as well as with their potential adversary, China, who is no less dependent in this respect.

In such an overall situation, given the intricacies of all these elements, the United States comes forward as a “hyperpower,” much stronger than the “superpower” it was in times of bipolarity. Especially since the U.S. had two consecutive record periods of economic expansion, first under Reagan—“in terms of duration, again except for war years—“and then under Clinton—“an absolute record. The economic bet initiated under Reagan was, in a certain sense, won. It was certainly a risky bet, to the extent that some had foreseen the final phase of American decline in this period. It should be remembered that the principal best-seller on the American decline was published in 1987, in the midst of the Reagan period: Paul Kennedy’s book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. That book made a

monumental error in judgment on the actual significance of military spending. Its interpretation rested on the following idea: Excessive military spending was, as such, a sign of the decline of the American Empire and it was going to accelerate its collapse by “overstretch,” i.e., going beyond the means available. However, the reverse occurred. The Reagan bet consisted of an apparently incoherent combination of neoliberalism, including tax cuts for the wealthiest, and of “military Keynesianism,” a (debatable) formula that designates expenditure in the military sector for the purpose of economic stimulus. The combination of a reduction in fiscal revenues and an increase in military spending resulted in an astronomical budget deficit, accompanied by a process of consolidation of the arms industry through transactions on the stock market.

In sight of the end result, the Reagan bet was crowned a success. Another dimension of this bet was to bring the economy and power of the USSR to its knees. Reagan himself, in his autobiography (*An American Life*), indicates that he “was briefed” by the CIA, before his inauguration, on how the economy of the USSR was in a state of asphyxiation. He deduced from this that, in this context, the arms race would accentuate their choking. This is certainly not the fundamental cause of the collapse of the Soviet economy, but it is an incontestable fact that to simultaneously wage the war in Afghanistan and compete in a paroxysmal stage of the arms race greatly accelerated the agony of the USSR. Left standing alone in the field, the United States thus emerged as the only power in a unipolar world, as a “hyperpower.”

Védrine’s term also reflected French bitterness vis-à-vis an American partner who had exclusive decision-making power on all the key questions that emerged during that time. Such was even the case with those questions that most directly affected the European Union, like the maintenance of NATO, its change from a defensive alliance to a “security organization,” i.e., a military interventionist one, and on top of it all the expansion of NATO to Eastern Europe, toward the member states of the ex-Warsaw Pact, and even later to include former Soviet republics. The ostracism of the new Russia that resulted from these plans would impact the future of Europe. It was, however, Washington that decided, playing on inter-European divisions when necessary.

Moreover, as I already indicated, America’s increased power was propped up by the very long phase of economic expansion under Clinton, and by a revival of productivity, and conquering or reconquering leading-edge positions in the realm of technology—a realm in which military expenditure played a determining role. We saw then the “comeback” of the United States, after the stage of deindustrialization in the 1970s that had given rise to so many declinist forecasts. This whole set of factors consolidated the hyperpower image, which culminated, paradoxically, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, with the “war on terror” launched by George W. Bush’s team—the most arrogant administration in U.S. history. Its arrogance expresses the intoxication of this “unipolar moment” at its apogee with the coming to power of the members of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and the occupation of the ideological and political scene by the neoconservatives. The Bush administration would convey all this in the way it reacted to September 11, the way it led the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, then of Iraq in 2003.

**A POSTERIORI, various European analysts put the question: How is it possible that a power such as the United States allowed an administration such as George W. Bush’s to seize control? That deserves an explanation.**

IT SEEMS to me that two major dimensions are involved here. One relates to the sociopolitical changes inside the United States. The bourgeoisie as a class never rules directly and collectively, of course, but in a country like the United States, it does not even exclusively choose the political personnel that will form the executive branch. There is an electoral selection process that is not solely determined by big capital.

The sociopolitical changes of the American electorate have been extensively studied. The evolutions of political topography toward the South and the West gave rise to thorough empirical studies. The increase in votes from the South was decisive, among other things, for the election of George W. Bush. A new political personnel imposed

itselfâ€”tied, for example, to the Texas bourgeoisieâ€”far removed from the Weberian ideal-type of “rational” industrial capitalism. The sectors whose influence is on the rise are related to oil, to speculation, and to real estate or property income. This is reinforced by the conservative counterrevolution that’s been on the rise since Reagan: it accentuated the selection of this type of personnel, who rely in turn on organized and business-like religious networks. The rise in power of the latter group expresses the “anomic” [from “anomie”: the loss of norms or benchmarks] social impact of neo-liberal counter-reforms that created a wide opening for the Christian Right, for religious retrenchment.

That’s what I see as the causes of the shift in political terrain. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 did not yet reflect this shift, at least not exclusively. In reality, Reagan benefited especially from the reaction to what was perceived as the decline of the United States, by running on the theme of a comeback against Jimmy Carter, who became the very incarnation of decline. However, Reagan created conditions that accelerated and amplified the shift in political terrain toward the Right. When Clinton became president in 1993, he had to face the election of an ultra-right Congress the following year, with the Democrats losing the majority in the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, and likewise with the Senate, after six years. The Republican Right went on to preserve the majority in the two houses of Congress until the election of November 2006.

However, at the time when it came to power in 2001, the new Bush administration was not yet perceived for what it will prove to be. The sharp rupture with the political legacy of Bush Senior was not obvious from the start. On foreign policy grounds, Bush 41 fitted the traditional mainstream of the American establishment. However, it would soon become apparent that there were significantly more differences between Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. than between Bush Sr. and Clinton with respect to foreign policy. In other words, the Bush 43 administration broke with a long bipartisan tradition in U.S. foreign policy.

The election of Bush Jr. was not a collective choice of the ruling class. That the installation of such a team was acceptedâ€”the decision of the Supreme Court regarding the dispute over electoral results in Florida as well as the non-objection of Al Goreâ€”expresses an important fact: key sectors of the American bourgeoisie were in favor of an offensive in the Gulf region, which people knew was one of the priorities of the new Republican team. They wanted the situation resulting from the first Gulf War to be resolved, which Clinton had not been able to do. This is the second element that explains the rise to power of the Bush-Cheney team. Indeed, control of this region was certainly a key element in the acceptance of the quasi-usurpation of power by this team.

Moreover, the Bush-Cheney team seemed initially to insure continuity and political balance, with the presence of Colin Powell as secretary of state as a guarantee of a sort of levelheadedness and respect for the bipartisan dimension appropriate to the field of foreign policy. Initially, the Bush administration even acted with moderation, as with the attitude it adopted in 2001 at the time of the crisis created by the landing of an American spy plane on the Chinese island of Hainan, after a collision with a Chinese fighter plane. Beyond statements, the Bush administration did not really flinch when Beijing refused “to restore the plane intact” and returned it in pieces.

It was September 11, 2001, which offered this administration the opportunity to implement its central project. Cheney and Rumsfeld shared a true obsession over the question of Iraq. Their initial reaction to September 11â€”today this fact is well documentedâ€”was: “Let’s invade Iraq” although they knew very well that Iraq had nothing to do with the attacks of September 11.

**IF SEPTEMBER 11 made it possible to implement the perspective of the new administration, didn’t the actual choices they made reveal the intrinsic limits and contradictions that comprise this perspective?**

WITH THE administration of George W. Bush, one can say Paul Kennedy’s thesis of “imperial overstretch”â€”altogether banalâ€”is to some extent validated. Indeed, this administration got involved in risky

ventures that went well beyond the means of the United States. And they did this on every level. Let us start first of all with the military. One of the consequences of the Vietnam War has been the development of both a new doctrine by the Pentagon and new military programming relying on the progress of military technology and leading to a reduction in troops, combined with the elimination of the draft and the professionalization of the army—all expressing the will to no longer depend on the enlistment of youth that had proven to be the Achilles' heel in Vietnam.

Thus, under Reagan, they developed what was described as a “revolution in military affairs,” closely overlapping with the more general technological revolution (telecommunications, the Internet, lasers, new materials, widespread use of computers, etc). With the first Gulf War, these new methods were tested in the real world, on the ground, providing at the same time an impressive spectacle for the rest of the world. In 2001 moreover, on the technological level, the weaponry used ten years earlier against Iraq was largely superseded. All that confirmed the opinion of the civilian core of the Bush administration—certainly more than the military personnel who have the advantage of practical knowledge—that military technology was to some extent all-powerful. Already the former academic Madeleine Albright, when she was Secretary of State during Bill Clinton's second term, had asked the more circumspect military professional Colin Powell: “What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?” This tendency to believe in the absolute power of military technology was illustrated most clearly during the invasion of Iraq. It was Donald Rumsfeld, a founding member of the PNAC—who settled the debate over the numbers of troops necessary to control Iraq. He made his decision against the wishes of a significant layer in the Pentagon that considered the project of controlling Iraq with a military presence on the ground reduced to only 150,000 soldiers utterly unrealistic. Many in the military maintained that two or three times that number of soldiers were necessary in order to have a chance to “stabilize” Iraq.

The military adventurism of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld team started in Afghanistan in October 2001, and then continued in Iraq. It led to a situation of overstretch of the military means of the United States: not of its technological means, to be sure, but of its “human resources.” From any point of view, the capacities of the U.S. armed forces are clearly above the level of the Vietnam War—except on one point that was grossly underestimated: soldiers. The current troop levels of the U.S. armed forces are much reduced compared with the time of the Vietnam War: in 1970, the total personnel of the Department of Defense exceeded 3 million people; in 2005, that figure hardly reaches 1.4 million, which includes all civilian personnel, administrative and otherwise. Since then, the pressures put on the “human resources” of the armed forces have been pushed to the extreme.

On top of that, the Pentagon does not even manage anymore to achieve its moderate recruitment goals—in spite of the increasingly “enticing” conditions it offers in the form of salary and other advantages. This is surely where the Achilles' heel of U.S. military power is located. In a certain sense, this confirms the resilience of the “Vietnam syndrome,” which looked as if it had been overcome in 1991. The quagmire in Iraq actually revived the syndrome. Moreover, to the extent that the quantitative recruitment goals are not reached, there is a tendency to lower the threshold of qualitative requirements, which has resulted in, among other things, the increase in the number of “blunders” in Iraq. The situation in Iraq—and the exposure of the massive lies that served to justify the launching of war—have both aggravated these problems, so it is barely conceivable, if not unthinkable, to restore the draft.

Thus, the Bush administration is forced to rediscover a banality: one does not control a population solely with military technology, no matter how cutting-edge it is. Above all, you have to deploy foot soldiers on the ground. In the debate over the invasion of Iraq, the ideological clique of neoconservatives, of whom Paul Wolfowitz was the principal representative in the administration, was used by Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld to make a case that it was not necessary to put more men on the ground in Iraq than the Pentagon already had at its disposal. It was this clique that propagated the famous illusion that invading American troops would be welcomed in Iraq with flowers. The administration's self-deception in this regard was decisive in its ability to overcome objections on the part of military personnel. The question, of course, was whether the United States could control Iraq in the long term: This is indeed why Saddam Hussein had been kept in power after the 1991 war—for lack of any certainty that the United States would be able to control the country after his fall. The Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld team settled these doubts with a

tremendous dose of wishful thinking.

This monumental miscalculation led to quagmire in Iraq. Iraq turned into a “catastrophe,” to use Zbigniew Brzezinski’s expression. The Bush administration will leave the scene soon with what is, indeed, the most catastrophic result in the history of American administrations. The greatest failure of U.S. foreign policy will figure among its liabilities. Coming to power at a time when the “hyperpower” was at its apogee and had considerable capital, it leaves after having thrown the United States into bankruptcy. And the expression here is not only metaphorical.

**READING THE coverage in the American press, from the New York Times to the Wall Street Journal, two poles emerge. One, the economic difficulties that American capitalism is experiencing; the other, the sustained effort to permanently expand the arms potential of the United States. How can we understand the conjunction of these two elements?**

CERTAINLY THE military expenditures of the U.S. are enormous. In real dollars, they are the highest since the Second World War. They even exceed those from the period of the Korean War (1950–1953). Nonetheless, in relative terms, that is, compared to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the United States still has a considerable margin for maneuver. At approximately 5 percent of GDP, U.S. military expenditure is still far from the peak of nearly 15 percent during the Korean War and 9 percent during the Vietnam War. Military expenditure remains even below the level of 7 percent reached in “peacetime” under Reagan in 1985.

Still, the more alarming question is that of the twin deficits, which rebounded after the balancing of the federal budget achieved under Clinton, an indispensable measure on his agenda following the massive accumulation of debt under Reagan. The United States is again submerged under twin deficits, the most serious of which is not so much the budget deficit—which was worse under Reagan—but the balance of payments/balance of trade deficit that has beat all records.

From this angle, we are facing a configuration that resembles, with necessary adjustments, that of the first serious crisis of American decline at the time of the Vietnam War. Vietnam already revealed a situation of overstretch, in terms of the indicators at that time, the cost of the war contributing to the whole of foreign spending and to a balance of trade moving into the red that would begin to pull the balance of payments toward a deficit. This would result in the end of the international monetary system established at Bretton Woods in 1944 and based on fixed dollar-gold parity and fixed exchange rates.

Today, taking into consideration the convergence of factors that I indicated, I think that we are living through a similar moment of crisis and decline, of which the slipping of the dollar is one indication. The number one priority of the next American administration will be to attempt to remedy this situation. It will have to repair the damage caused, which is not completely impossible. The United States has enormous resources at its disposal and is capable of bouncing back, so much the more since it can inveigle significant outside resources from its position as world overlord, both on the monetary level (seignorage) and on the politico-military level (suzerainty). And it’s hard to imagine how the United States could be dislodged from this position.

In U.S. ruling circles, the understanding that their major trump card resides in military supremacy is acute. In contrast with those who never cease ringing the death knell of an endless decline, we must be extremely cautious. In reality, U.S. military supremacy compared to the rest of the world is at a record high and constitutes the key to the vault. In the military realm, the United States overspends all other countries on Earth combined—something unprecedented in world history. Arms expenditures obviously do not translate into immediate military power, because a whole series of other conditions enter into the balance. Nonetheless, while not dismissing the Achilles’ heel I mentioned previously, the hyperpower remains a hyperpower as far as the power to strike from a distance is concerned.

And Washington is keen on revalorizing its role as Lord Protector of Europe and Japan. The policies outlined by Brzezinski for the Clinton administration—of which the expansion of NATO was the most pivotal piece—aimed to weaken Russia, confronting it with an imposed choice between submission and abdicating all imperial pretensions, or a return to a posture of opposition to the Western system. By presenting itself as the defender of the countries bordering Russia, Washington revalorizes its role as protector of “democracy” and “freedom,” which was its ideological rationale during the Cold War.

Moreover, the United States positions itself as the rampart against the growing power of China, which worries Japan. Thus, from the perspective of the alliances formed during the Cold War and expanded since the end of the Cold War, Washington still affirms itself in a real position of overlord. And that’s what future administrations will attempt to exploit anew, by attempting to refurbish the hegemonic “soft power” of the United States that was largely damaged under Bush’s presidency.

### **HOW DO you explain the roots of the alliance between London and Washington?**

WHEN BRITISH capitalism saw that it was on the slope of an irreversible imperial decline after the Second World War and especially after the Suez crisis in 1956, it took the option of wagering on its alliance with the United States. This alliance was facilitated by an obvious cultural affinity between the two countries and was supported by capitalist interpenetration, a liaison between Wall Street and the City of London. The historic economic ties between the two countries were already very strong, of course.

It is also possible to examine the political attitude of European countries toward Washington in relation to the degree of economic interpenetration between their respective capitalism and U.S. capitalism. We can take the example of Holland or, certainly for a long period of time at least, Switzerland.

The economic and political elite of the United Kingdom chose to play with the strongest. This option was, and still is, considered by the elites as the best way to guarantee themselves a slice of the pie that they would not have had the option of retaining if they had followed the French example. That’s why de Gaulle was opposed to Great Britain’s joining the Common Market: for him, London represented Washington’s Trojan horse. On their side, the British ruling circles thought that the Gaullist attitude was reminiscent of Don Quixote. They still think so. They did not believe in the Franco-German alliance that Chirac and Schröder tried to establish in order to salvage a margin of autonomy against Washington. They remained faithful to the Atlanticist commitment, even more so since they appeared to be a counterweight to the Chirac-Schröder policies in Europe, something that increased their value in the eyes of their American ally.

Certainly, Blair has been called a “poodle” and the United Kingdom is often the brunt of contemptuous commentary in the United States—on the part of Brzezinski, for instance. But all that is unimportant compared to the recompense the British ruling circles expect to gain for their loyalty. Their involvement in the Iraq War is an example of this. Blair, with the support of the City, aligned with Washington for a very simple and comprehensible reason. Saddam Hussein thought he could play on what some have termed “inter-imperialist contradictions” by offering juicy oil contracts to the French and the Russians—I say “Russians” and not “Soviets” because this took place in the 1990s. He hoped they would push for the lifting of the embargo imposed on Iraq throughout the entire decade and up to the invasion of the country.

Against this, the English maintained their tight alliance with the United States and considered themselves rewarded when they were chosen to be the Bush administration’s Sancho Panza for the invasion of Iraq. Thus they hoped, and still do, to gain a piece of the pie of Iraqi oil, which is enormous. They think their American ally will guarantee them this and that the Russians, as well as the French, will get nothing, or at most a few crumbs. Certainly, Blair ended up paying his part of the price for the monumental error committed by the Bush administration in its conquest of Iraq. But

that doesn't change their fundamental choice.

**OVER THE past months, there is an impression that French policy toward the United States is shifting. Can you explain this?**

SARKOZY'S POLICIES can be read as the result of an acknowledgement of the failure of a timid attempt to repeat de Gaulle's position on the part of the Jacques Chirac–Dominique de Villepin duo. I say timid because a lot of people tend to forget that in 1995, when Chirac took over the presidency, he brought about a partial return of France into NATO's integrated military command, from which de Gaulle had withdrawn in 1966. Therefore, Chirac himself began to offer some tokens of good French behavior to Washington.

However French interests are most systematically in competition with U.S. interests. From Airbus (versus Boeing) to bananas (produced in Martinique or in Guadeloupe versus the control of banana production by American companies in Central America and elsewhere), and passing through the export of arms—as is evident in the efforts to put the Rafale fighter aircraft on the market—or nuclear production. Not to mention oil and gas, which are at the center of more or less open tensions, from Algeria to Chad via Angola or Libya. So the range of conflicts of interest is quite wide.

Charles de Gaulle's policies consisted of benefiting from the situation created by the Cold War by placing himself in the “gray zone” between the two superpowers. De Gaulle and the ruling sectors of French capital thought they could gain more from this autonomous space than by hitching themselves to Washington's wagon. General de Gaulle's policies would translate into an opening toward the Soviet Union—“Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals”—or into a recognition of China. This attitude of “non-alignment”—to use an expression that overstates things somewhat but that was adopted in the Third World—was France's trump card for a long time. French capital built ties with countries that Washington considered pariahs, but that were eager for relations with Western powers. Since then, French capital found itself in a privileged position within these countries. The Arab world is one of the zones where this perspective was most clearly concretized, obtaining results that were not guaranteed in advance as they are in France's colonial dominion in sub-Saharan Africa.

This is how we can understand Charles de Gaulle's position in 1967, at the time of the Arab-Israeli war. It was a complete reversal of the French position from the 1950s and '60s. Previously, France had been the main supporter of Israel: Israeli arms were mostly French; the nuclear reactor at Dimona was of French origin. The American-Israeli military alliance came about in the mid-1960s; it did not exist in the same way previously. But people often make the mistake of projecting present-day tendencies onto the past. Seeing Israel hitch itself to the U.S. machine, de Gaulle chose to radically change direction and to play the Arab card, thus producing “France's Arab policy.” But with the end of the Soviet Union, the gray zone from the Cold War days vanished. Certainly, “rogue states” remain, but they are not very consequential. At the time of the Iraq War, Villepin's rhetoric won some applause, but in concrete terms the result was rather slim for French capital.

The Americans took over Iraq and their hold on the region remains very strong, even though they have to deal with numerous and very serious problems. Therefore, in some way, to get back to Sarkozy, he is the reflection of how the field that French capital can cultivate, by playing the anti-American card, has shrunk. A sizeable fraction of French capital clearly wants to stop playing Don Quixote and wants to see France align itself with the rest of contemporary Europe in joining a calmer partnership with the United States. This Atlanticist option has always existed in France and has come into conflict with the Gaullist option more than once. Certainly, if the United States plunges into decline, there will be a redefinition of strategic choices and the material interests that lie beneath them.

**WITHOUT ENTERING into an electoral perspective or falling into Obama-mania, can't Barack Obama's irruption onto the U.S. political scene be situated in relationship to the decline you talked about and the will**

### to thwart it?

THE FACT that a Black American like Obama, who doesn't have the socio-professional pedigree of a Colin Powell, emerges as possible president of the United States cannot be underrated. Of course, some important sectors of capital support him. But his emergence is nonetheless an extraordinary sociopolitical event in a country that, only forty years ago, was dealing with institutionalized racial discrimination. This shows that affirmative action bears real results; the attacks against measures tied to affirmative action within the United States show this clearly.

That said, why does Barack Obama have a serious chance of winning? Here, we get back to the question of the selection of political personnel, as we discussed earlier. It obviously was not a conclave of the capitalist class as such that chose Obama. Still, the dominant economic circles weigh heavily on choices made, not only by way of their financial resources and their networks, but also through their mass media that represent an entirely determining factor in this type of electoral battle. So, why Obama?

In my opinion, repairing the damage caused by the Bush administration could be facilitated by such a profound and radical change of face, change of image for the United States. An "imperialism with a Black and human face" could restore the image of the United States that was so greatly tarnished by the disaster of the Bush administration. In international polls, the image of the United States has never reached such lows, even during the period of Vietnam. The majority sectors of the American dominant class feel the need to reconstruct the image and the reputation of the country. A figure such as Barack Obama could facilitate this makeover and reconfirm key elements in the American ideology: democracy, social mobility, etc. This is very important from the point of view of "soft power." The sole fact that Obama is the candidate of the Democratic Party, regardless of what the final electoral result will be, already impresses the entire world.

Obviously, for Obama to be able to play this role, for him to don the clothes of the official figure he will have to be, he had to offer some tokens showing his good behavior. On this question, the composition of his staff is of utmost significance. As for his domestic policy, several analysts have already pointed out that it is to the right of Hillary Clinton's proposed domestic policy. In the realm of foreign policy, Zbigniew Brzezinski is again the guru. There's also Anthony Lake, close to Brzezinski, who was national security adviser during Bill Clinton's first term in office, then Clinton's special envoy.

Obama, then, is surrounded by people who shaped the perspective of the two Clinton administrations regarding imperial policy. These personnel, drawing lessons from the failure of the Bush administration, today have a tendency to "talk left." Reading Brzezinski's latest writings is quite revealing here: it's Saint Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus! The role of someone like Joseph Stiglitz, Obama's economic adviser, is along the same lines. We find here a taking into consideration of the swing of the bourgeois ideological pendulum necessary after Bush.

The interests of American imperialism obviously find their ultimate guarantee in military supremacy, but a politico-ideological facelift is a necessary and useful complement. Under Bush, the arrogance and right-wing shift went so far that it seems imperative for the "enlightened" fraction of the American establishment to steer "to the left," at least in words. This is where someone like Barack Obama can be useful. The ruling class isn't worried by him because he is not carried along by a wave of social radicalization. The question isn't one of individuals per se. Take Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example. He was the most progressive president in modern American history. This was not due to his personality, even if you do need an adequate personality for such a role, but to the profound social radicalization at the time of the Great Depression that he gave voice to while also holding it in check. It's really not individual personalities that make situations, but situations that make individual personalities.

However, there is no possible analogy between the United States of the 1930s—'from the point of view of the balance of social forces, the class struggle, the strength of the working class'—and the current situation. At the heart

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of the ruling capitalist fractions, there is no expression of serious concern. Someone like Obama could be advantageous for promoting U.S. interests unless the ultra-reactionary course of the Bush administration finds itself confirmed in the election of John McCain, with the United States plunging deeper toward a decline that would be symbolized by a gerontocratic figure à la Brezhnev.

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