

Militarism and Neoliberalism: Two Sides of the Same Coin

NATO Summit Highlights Neo-Con/Neo-Liberal Overlap: Both of America's imperial ideologies have failed

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As the general election phase of the American presidential election gets underway, the recent NATO summit serves as a potent reminder of just how little difference there ultimately is between the neo-con extremists who dominated US foreign policy under George W Bush, and the neo-liberals who run just about everything in the Obama administration.

Most notably, dozens of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans returned their medals in a mass action that recalled Operation Dewey Canyon III, in April, 1971, when more than a thousand members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War held five days of marches and demonstrations against the Vietnam War in Washington, DC, including a memorial service near the Tomb of the Unknown and a ceremony on the Capitol steps where more than 800 veterans returned their combat medals.

Sgt Alejandro Villatoro introduced the other veterans at the NATO protests:

“At this time, one by one, veterans of the wars of NATO will walk up on stage. They will tell us why they chose to return their medals to NATO. I urge you to honour them by listening to their stories. Nowhere else will you hear from so many who fought these wars about their journey from fighting a war to demanding peace. Some of us killed innocents. Some of us helped in continuing these wars from home. Some of us watched our friends die. Some of us are not here, because we took our own lives. We did not get the care promised to us by our government. All of us watched failed policies turn into bloodshed.”

Two sides of the same coin

Like their Vietnam-era forebearers, these anti-war veterans have broad, though often unacknowledged support among the American people. In the most recent poll, support for the Afghanistan War is down to 27 per cent, with 66 per cent opposed – levels similar to the Vietnam War in 1971, with support down dramatically, 20 per cent lower than just two years ago. Yet, President Obama recently signed a 10-year security pact with Afghan President Hamid Karzai during a surprise trip to Afghanistan. There are virtually no traces of al-Qaeda left in Afghanistan, but our continued involvement there may continue creating enemies for decades to come.

This is not how most people expected things to be. Obama had, after all, given an anti-war speech in October 2002, hadn't he? And that was a major reason netroots activists gave him

a decisive advantage in the 2008 Democratic primary. He was the candidate people trusted to end Bush's wars, and set out a new direction. Once in office, however, Obama's policies showed far more continuity than change when compared to Bush's - a pattern that's only grown more pronounced over time, as the NATO summit clearly underscored.

This isn't to say there aren't some important differences between neo-cons and neo-liberals. Two in particular stand out: First off, the neo-cons only represent one faction of the conservative ideological kaleidoscope, with their focus and influence limited largely to foreign affairs. In contrast, neo-liberals represent an integrated economic, military/foreign policy, social issues policy framework, applying naïve faith in market-based solutions to anything that moves. Second, the neo-cons are stupendously reckless, impulsive, undisciplined and dangerous, and could easily plunge the world into any number of military disasters, while the calmer, more methodical neo-liberals are far more prone toward drifting, or stumbling into disaster, rather than enthusiastically plunging in head first. These temperamental differences also lead the neo-liberals to be more multi-lateralist.

In the long run, however, the end results tend to be depressingly similar. Allies may find the neo-liberals more pleasant and less unpredictable to work with, but it's all the same empire in the end. Neither the neo-cons nor the neo-liberals have any intention to realistically face up to the facts of imperial decline or the damage America's empire does to its own democracy, much less anyone else's. And neither group has any clue about how to build a sustainable economy with broad prosperity for all.

Obama was elected president largely based on the illusion his policies would not substantially overlap with the neo-con thrust of Bush's policies, but would constitute a fundamental repudiation of them. Instead, Obama's finally managed to "rationalise" Bush's policies - in both a managerial and a propaganda sense - far more effectively than Bush ever dreamed of. Yes, the term "global war on terror" is gone, but the concept lives on, more unquestionable than ever by virtue of not even being named. Torture is out, but assassination by drone is in. More dissenters than ever have been prosecuted, or are under investigation, with far less vigorous public dissent than Bush ever faced. War criminals walk free under the rubric of "looking forward, not back", while whistleblowers like Bradley Manning are prosecuted for aiding the terrorists. If Obama were still a state senator, he might even be morally outraged.

Return of the Project for a New America

Meanwhile, the shifting focus from ground troops to drone warfare, while continuing Reagan's Star Wars missile defence fantasy, betrays a much stronger commitment on Obama's part than Bush's to the long-term neo-con endeavour of transforming America's military into a highly agile, post-modern, cyber-age fighting force, what the neo-cons called "transform[ing] US Forces to exploit the 'revolution in military affairs'" [RMD] - one of "four core missions" identified in the Project for a New America's September 2000 campaign document, "Rebuilding America's Defenses". The report cited two defining aspects of RMD: "global missile defences" and "control of space and cyberspace", but the shift to a central focus on information technology - heralded by the use of GPS technology in the first Gulf War - has ripple effects that profoundly impact plans for every service branch of America's military.

Although the document was largely overlooked at the time, and Bush proved singularly

inept at fulfilling the first “core mission” to “defend the American homeland”, in many ways “Rebuilding America’s Defenses” was eerily prophetic of America’s military response to 9/11 – despite the fact that the report barely even mentioned terrorists themselves, except for the possibility they might take over a communications satellite. At one point, the report frankly noted, “While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein.” Elsewhere, it said, “The process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor.” 9/11 was just such an event – and yet, for all their bluster, and all their enthusiasm, when all was said and done, the neo-cons were simply not up for the job.

It’s worth noting here that the other two “core missions” identified were:

-fight and decisively win multiple, simultaneous major theatre wars;

-perform the “constabulary” duties associated with shaping the security environment in critical regions

On the first point, the neo-cons typical lack of impulse control not only drew them to the idea of multiple simultaneous wars in principle, but also in practice, invading Iraq while leaving Afghanistan not just unfinished, but deteriorating – yet another indication of their inability to execute their own fantasies. Obama’s firm commitment to multi-lateralism draws jeers – and worse – from the neo-con crowd, but ultimately it translates into a more realistic way of fighting multiple wars at once. On the second point, Obama’s neoliberal efficiency has manifested itself in a much more thorough and extensive attention to “fighting terrorism” in a wider range of countries than the neo-cons ever managed. Which brings us to the recent NATO summit, and the accompanying “No NATO” demonstrations.

Climbing the NATO summit

While America’s corporate media routinely downplayed the demonstrations, the range of issues and contradictions they highlighted was simply overwhelming, the organisers themselves implicitly admitted, when they moved the scheduled G8 meeting to Camp David, as private a locale as such a conference can have. In Maryland, the Occupy G8 Peoples Summit convened to discuss a radically different economic vision, reflecting the bottom-up perspective of the Occupy movement and similarly-minded movements in Greece, Spain, Britain and the Arab world.

That vision might seem hopelessly utopian, but every aspect of the modern welfare state once seemed equally utopian, from universal education, to minimum wage laws, to retirement insurance – and every aspect of the modern welfare state is now threatened by unaccountable elites who seem all too eager to destroy it. Neo-liberals like Obama may oppose the extremist austerity measures embodied in proposals like the Ryan Budget (even Romney has now admitted they would lead to renewed recession), but even if Obama were to win resoundingly in November, he’s still on record as favouring a multi-trillion-dollar “grand bargain” that would drastically slash core welfare state programmes like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

Chicago saw a much wider array of activities spanning a full week, most prominently, a demonstration led by the National Nurses Union calling for a 0.5 per cent “Robin Hood” tax

on financial transactions, and the already-mentioned joint anti-war march and demonstration led by members of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) and Afghans for Peace. Many NNU members and their supporters showed up wearing red shorts and green felt Robin Hood-style hats.

NNU co-president Karen Higgins said the nurses want to fund healthcare instead of warfare. "We pay sales tax. It is time for Wall Street to start paying back what they owe the rest of the country and they need to pay sales tax." Other countries have such a tax, as did the US from 1914 through 1966. It could raise up to \$350 billion a year, according to the NNU.

Doing this would at least start to shift us back toward the sort of tax structure that helped produce the decades-long robust economic success of the early post-WWII years from 1946 through 1968.

Of course, those years were far from perfect – women and minorities were limited to second-class citizen status, at best. But the basic promise of broadly-shared prosperity for all is not something easily forgotten, once glimpsed – even tasted. And if possible for virtually all white men, then why not for everyone?

This is the question that haunts America – and the world – today. It is a question that neither neo-cons nor neo-liberals can possibly ever answer. And that is why, sooner or later, their failed ideologies must fall.

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