

The WTO, War and Globalisation: Forever New Frontiers

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“Forever New Frontiers”. Was this the motto of Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan, James Cook, the conquistadores as they sought new territories to conquer, resources to plunder and control and peoples to exterminate or enslave for the empires which they served?

Could it be the motto for the World Bank, IMF and the Asian Development Bank as their structural adjustment, deregulation and privatization programs create new opportunities for transnational corporations to control water, agriculture, biodiversity, devastate the environment and deny peoples’ rights to determine their own futures?

Would it suit the 145-member World Trade Organisation as the political and corporate powers which drive and benefit from the neoliberal agenda seek further expansion of WTO rules to draw in all areas of human activity and the natural world, to commodify all things for the sake of higher profit and control, and to lock in economic reforms and make binding commitments on governments to maintain market capitalist regimes?

When will we see weapons inspectors being sent to the offices of the WTO, IMF, World Bank, and ADB to find their weapons of mass destruction?

Forever New Frontiers could be the motto for the world’s self-styled globocop. From Plan Colombia in Central America to Operation Balikatan here in the Philippines, from the roundups and detention of Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants across America to the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US administration has continued to rain terror on many fronts in the service of its geopolitical interests, its domestic interests and corporate power and profit.

But “Forever New Frontiers” is the motto for Boeing, a giant among military-industrial corporations. While Boeing and other transnational corporations generously sponsored the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Seattle, its CEO Phil Condit co-chaired the Host Committee for the WTO along with Microsoft’s Bill Gates.

Generous donations flowed from the coffers of the defense and oil TNCs into the Bush political campaign, while a revolving door between corporate boardrooms and political office cements the close ties between public office and private sector interests.

“Forever New Frontiers” could be the motto of any of the world’s TNCs which dominate the global economy and which are in a very real sense the driving force behind WTO agreements, and the other forms of neoliberal imperialism which are causing human misery and ecological devastation across the world.

Engulfed by a crisis of legitimacy and growing people's resistance to the neoliberal agenda, September 11 has been a boon for free traders and TNCs. Shortly after the September 11 attacks, and a few weeks before the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Doha, US trade representative Robert Zoellick wrote a Washington Post article called Countering Terror With Trade (September 20 2001):

"... America's might and light emanate from our political, military and economic vitality. Our counteroffensive must advance U.S. leadership across all these fronts.... Economic strength — at home and abroad — is the foundation of America's hard and soft power. "

Support for the "war on terror" has been aggressively equated with support for neoliberal globalisation. In the wake of 9/11, at the Doha WTO Ministerial meeting in November 2001, the US and EU used strong-arm tactics and threats to bully many countries into submission as they sought further commitments to free trade and investment, and an even greater expansion of the WTO to include controversial issues like investment.

At home, 9/11 was used cynically to finally ram through fast track trade negotiating authority which gives the President executive authority to conclude new trade deals and to bypass any congressional debate, and was the pretext for a raft of repressive legislation like the Patriot Act.

Since it came into being in January 1995, some lofty claims have been made about the WTO's contributions to world peace. Former WTO Director-General Renato Ruggiero claimed that the WTO gave life to a post-war ideal that "economic freedom - free markets, free trade, the free movement of goods, capital and ideas - [are] a prerequisite for political and social freedoms around the world."

(Beyond the Multilateral Trading System Address to the 20th Seminar on International Security, Politics and Economics Institut pour les Hautes Etudes Internationales Geneva, 12 April 1999.)

"The WTO... is a system whose core purpose — from its inception in the aftermath of at the end of the Second World War — was the avoidance of global conflict and the promotion of peace. Peace through rules, peace through international cooperation, and peace through widening circles of prosperity", claimed the current WTO Director-General Supachai Panitchpakdi in a speech last November (Why Cancun Matters, 26 November 2002, Second International Conference on Globalisation, Leuven)

Yet the massive inequalities and injustices wrought by neoliberal policies threaten to bring about more instability, more popular unrest, and more conflict. Speaking in New Zealand on 18th February another former WTO Director-General, Mike Moore backed the war against Iraq: "I'm not frightened by American unilateralism," he said. "I'm more frightened by isolationism." For all the WTO talk about a common set of rules for all of its members, we can see very clearly that militarily and economically the US has maintained its unilateralist approach.

As pro-free market US journalist, Thomas Friedman put it: "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist - McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force and Marine Corps." (A Manifesto for the Fast World, New York Times Magazine, March 28, 1999).

Under George Bush senior's blood-for-oil-soaked rule the US military was dispatched to Somalia and the Gulf War to serve the same US corporate interests that backed both Bush regimes. In Plan Colombia and in its ongoing war against the people of Iraq we can see oil, and a battle on behalf of US corporations to control the profits flowing from it. Militarisation and enforceable free market disciplines are tools to make countries "safe" for foreign investors, at the expense of local communities' rights to determine their own futures.

WTO agreements undermine social and environmental policies, but protect the corporate war industry through a "security exception" in the GATT (Article XXI). The security exception states that a country cannot be stopped from taking any action it considers necessary to protect its essential security interests; actions "relating to the traffic in arms, ammunition and implements of war and such traffic in other goods and materials as is carried on directly for the purpose of supplying a military establishment (or) taken in time of war or other emergency in international relations".

As other countries beef up their defence and national security budgets in the war hysteria sweeping the globe since 9/11, defense corporations - some of the world's largest TNCs - are exporting their wares with renewed vigour. For them, at a time of economic recession, war is good for business.

Many of these same companies are providing security equipment for use against people's movements against war and the neoliberal agenda. In Seattle a product of another of the corporate defense giants, Northrop Grumman's Mobile Chemical Agent Detection (MCAD) provided security for WTO meeting delegates against potential chemical threats - not for the mass anti-WTO mobilizations subject to a variety of chemical agents in the security crackdown.

The military, the police and security agencies act as the muscle of the free market economy. From Fujimori's use of Peru's military to repress dissent and enforce a devastating IMF-sponsored programme, to the Philippine National Police's violent crushing of the Nissan, Yokohama Tires and Toyota strikes we can see how militarisation and repression go hand in hand with imposing the neoliberal agenda and protecting corporate profits.

And as we mobilise against the war on Iraq and expose the economic and geopolitical interests behind it, we should remember other, ongoing wars which have continued, from Chiapas to Mindanao.

As the Cancun WTO meeting approaches, the wordgames about terror and trade can only intensify. The second day of the Cancun WTO Ministerial meeting falls on the second anniversary of 9/11. And we must not forget that the Mexican government, backed by US military aid is waging war on indigenous peoples, especially in Guerrero and Chiapas, where the Zapatistas, rose up against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in January 1994 describing it as a death sentence for peasant farmers.

Further south, the US 1.6 billion Plan Colombia funds the aerial spraying of coca and opium fields with Roundup, the broad-spectrum herbicide patented by Monsanto. It is the Agent Orange of America's new Vietnam. (Agent Orange was also a Monsanto product.) Now the US administration plans to spray the jungle with a genetically engineered fungus which produces deadly toxins. It is deva*stating the rainforest and farmers crops, and causing massive displacement and misery for many Colombians.

Defence industry giant, United Tech's subsidiary Sikorsky has lobbied for its Black Hawk helicopters to be used in Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia aims to eliminate both leftwing guerrillas and grassroots democratic movements, to facilitate the seizure of the country's most valuable land. The US companies have identified billions of dollars' worth of oil and mineral deposits.

Plan Colombia is being advanced alongside IMF reforms which have wrought devastation to local industry and farming. Occidental Petroleum will receive some US \$98 million in corporate welfare - essentially military aid to protect their pipeline. In the USA on March 24th there will be a National Colombia mobilization targeting some of the key corporations which are benefiting from the \$1.6 billion Plan Colombia program.

Occidental in LA, Monsanto in St Louis, Sikorsky in Stratford, and Coca-Cola in Atlanta. From NAFTA and the FTAA to Plan Colombia, from the US military recolonisation of the Philippines to its war against Iraq, the US Administration's primary concern is making the world conform to its economic and political interests.

Meanwhile the Bush administration has pushed the adage "do as we say and not as we do" to the limit with its tariffs on imported steel and massive increase in farm subsidies, while demanding that the rest of the world adopt free market policies and join its crusade against whoever are next deemed to be "evil ones". And its Keynesian approach to the defense industry remains. So much for market forces.

We need to expose the links between the war and the interests of the biotech and agribusiness giants which are driving such agreements as the Agreement on Agriculture and the TRIPS, and whose products like Roundup and Agent Orange have been used in a neverending war against nature, and bloody crusades for corporate capitalism like Plan Colombia.

In many countries, there has been much talk about bringing the anti-globalisation movement together with the peace movement. The pressing issues which they confront are tightly connected. We cannot afford the luxury of single-issue politics. As we take to the streets against this war, we must also unmask and confront the weapons of mass destruction in the neoliberal armoury.

As we mobilise against the impacts of corporate globalisation in our communities we cannot afford to lose sight of the militarisation which is sweeping across the world As Michel Chossudovsky wrote recently: "One cannot disarm the "invisible fist" of the "free market" without concurrently dismantling the military and intelligence apparatus which supports it.

Military bases must be closed down, the war machine - including the production of advanced weapons systems - must be dismantled, implying a dramatic shift into civilian production." While we need to understand and expose their true nature we have to look beyond the agreements in the WTO, and focus on the values underpinning them - capitalist greed, imperialism and a colonial mindset. And to struggle for a better world with all our hearts, minds and bodies.

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