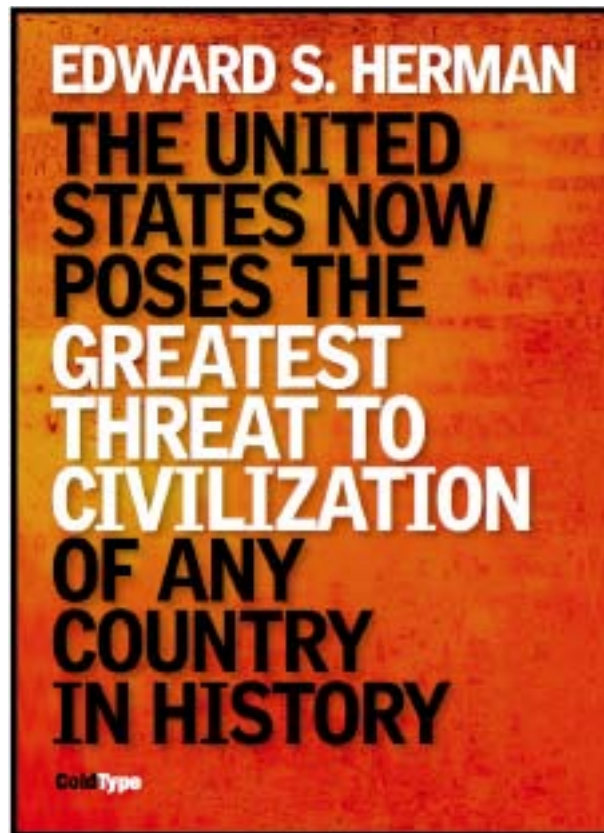


EDWARD S. HERMAN

**THE UNITED
STATES NOW
POSES THE
GREATEST
THREAT TO
CIVILIZATION
OF ANY
COUNTRY
IN HISTORY**

ColdType



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harsh title of this essay is not based on the belief that U.S. leaders are the most vicious ever, although they are amply arrogant, ruthless and even vicious, rendered more hypocritical by the veneer of self-righteousness and Godly service. Rather it rests, first, on

the facts that they have far more destructive power than any predecessors, have already used it and threaten to escalate their violence, and are not only subject to inadequate constraints but operate in a political culture that is volatile, manipulable, and contains threatening irrational elements. The rise of U.S. destructive power, far beyond anything related to national “defense,” and far beyond the capabilities of any potential rivals, was clearly purposeful and designed to serve both the transnational business and financial interests of the U.S. elite and the contractor-Pentagon-politician vested interest in militarization – the military-industrial complex (MIC).

The so-called “defense budget” should properly be called an “offense budget.” This budget, of enormous size – now exceeding the total for the rest of the world taken together – and the increasing aggressiveness of the U.S. elite in using its military superiority to “project power” by threats and violence in distant places, has put great pressure on other countries to build up their own arms. They need the arms not only to defend themselves against possible U.S. attack, but also against the U.S.’s use of its military superiority to establish threatening alliances and bases on their very borders. Such alliance building and basing has been carried out against substantial powers such as Russia and China, as well as lesser regional powers such as Iran. With imperialist arrogance, U.S. officials and pun-

dits have found the arms budget increases and weapons-testing responses of these lesser powers to be “provocative” and “challenging.” But these responses are absolutely inevitable, and the U.S. offense budget and power projection promotes the advance of an already emerging new arms race.

The arms race is also helped along by an array of U.S. policies that stymie arms control: withdrawing from the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty in 2001; sabotaging the 1972 Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention by refusing to agree to on-site inspections, also in 2001; the only nation opposing the UN Agreement to Curb the International Flow of Small Arms, in 2001; refusing to sign the Land Mine Treaty (Clinton in 1997); refusing to join 123 nations pledged to ban the use and production of anti-personnel bombs, again in 2001; rejecting the Comprehensive [Nuclear] Test Ban Treaty in 1999; refusing to recognize the International Court of Justice’s jurisdiction over this country’s “unlawful use of force” against Nicaragua in 1986; and of course failing to carry out its promise made in signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that it would work toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. This refusal to abide by international law and adhere to international agreements is regular practice where these interfere at all with U.S. plans to project power.

The U.S. military buildup has its own internal momentum, as the huge vested interests in weapons and war constantly search for technical advances and new missions that will justify larger budgets. It has been persuasively argued that the United States goads other states to engage in defensive responses in order to exploit these to justify increasing “defense” expenditures (e.g., Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing Against the United States,” *International Security*, Summer 2005). Furthermore, the military superiority and desire to test and prove the efficacy of the advancing military – and deplete stocks that will then need replenishing – make for provocative behavior and a willingness to take risks that lead more readily to war. It also makes the country more willing to attack defenseless small countries, in part because it is so easy, and in Madeleine Albright’s words: “What’s the point of having this marvelous military... if we don’t use it?” And it impels the U.S. leaders to overestimate how easily they can bully or beat into submission smaller countries like Vietnam and Iraq (on Vietnam, see Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance*).

Both the external and internal constraints on militarization and war are weak.

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U.S. military and economic power have allowed it to engage in three wars of aggression in violation of the UN Charter in the last decade without any serious opposition by the UN or “international community” (i.e., governments capable of any effective opposition to hegemonic power). Even earlier it was able to kill millions and virtually destroy Indochina, ravage Central America via murderous proxies, support South Africa’s rampages against the frontline states and Israel’s invasions of Lebanon, without any UN or international community obstruction. In the case of its attack on Iraq the United States even received from the UN ex post facto recognition of its occupation and pacification rights – which helps explain the August 19, 2003 bombing of the UN offices in Baghdad – and the UN is busily engaged in providing the United States and Israel with some kind of quasi-legal sanction for the next phase of the U.S.’s serial aggressions.

Global publics have disapproved of these aggressions, and protests have grown in breadth and size, but thus far they have not been able to stop the onslaughts. Democracy is not working well across the globe as elite rulers have regularly ignored public antiwar sentiment as expressed in elections as well as polls, and where they have not, as in France and Turkey in 2003, those rulers have been vilified in the United States and have struggled to compensate for their democratic excesses. In the United States itself, not only has the ruling elite been able to ignore poll majorities favoring an exit from Iraq, the 2006 election victory of the Democrats, widely seen to have been a reflection of the public’s interest in withdrawal, has not prevented a further Bush escalation of the war, with only nominal Democratic Party resistance. In another mark of democratic failure, the Democrats agreed to remove a funding bill requirement that Bush seek congressional approval before launching an attack on Iran.

It should also be noted that in the United States, executive power has been so centralized and the checks and balances system so weakened that a single man or clique is now capable of taking the country into war (which they have already done in the case of Iraq, based on brazen lies). That single man or clique also has the power to use nuclear weapons, which the United States has used before (uniquely), and which the U.S. leadership is reportedly willing and even eager to use against Iran to end another (fraudulent) “mushroom cloud” threat and to teach the world a lesson about who is boss. In short, the world’s most urgent and real “mushroom cloud” threat is located in the hands of a few proven irrespon-

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sibles with executive power in the United States.

A second reason why the United States poses such a major threat to civilization is that while the impending climate and environmental crisis is rooted in unrestrained economic growth, instead of leading the world toward a reorientation and restraint the United States continues to oppose these and pursue short-term economic advantage. It is the leader of the neoliberal revolution, presses for the opening up of more Third World markets and more blind growth, and actively opposes collective and meaningful actions that might constrain or reduce the human contribution to global warming. It is a beautiful illustration of the triumph of immediate gratification and the higher irresponsibility of the dominant business and MIC elite.

A third reason why this country poses such a serious threat is that the world cannot afford either the waste of an arms race or the social costs of the neoliberal revolution, both of which the United States presses. Global inequalities have increased, billions of people are short of water, food, adequate medical care and decent educational resources; and these plus the Western wars of domination have increased ethnic tensions, crime, clientelism, and mass migrations, thereby causing more conflict, terrorism and wars, as well as causing vast human suffering.

The world needs leadership in resolving these real problems, and what it has been getting from the United States are policies that waste resources, stoke conflict, kill and destroy, and literally fight against a constructive dealing with the threatening environmental disasters. The “end times” folks that have close links to the Bush administration may be getting their Armageddon without any divine aid, merely by Bush-U.S. policy as usual.

**APPENDIX:
COMMENT ON ROBERT WRIGHT ON THE TERRORISTS'
RESPONSIBILITY FOR A CIVILIZATION THREAT**

IN an op-ed column in the New York Times of April 28, 2007 (“Planet Of The Apes”), guest columnist Robert Wright asks whether when civilizations reach a high-tech stage, as we have, they may cause them to self-destruct and wipe themselves out. For Wright, the real and causal threat comes from terrorists who hate us. He acknowledges that we actually produced terrorists after 9/11 by “freaking out and invading one too many countries,” and that our “unwitting” help might contribute to a positive feedback loop and a “planetary death spiral” But we are innocent of responsibility for fundamental causes.

He starts by rejecting the possibility of a “classic nuclear armageddon” because the “threat is in remission” given economic interdependence and “crisis-averting lines of communication” that “have gotten stronger since the cold war.” He doesn’t mention the U.S.’s three aggressions in eight years, plan of permanent military domination, unilateralism, rearmament, rejection of international law, open threat of preventive war, efforts to make nuclear arms more “practicable,” threat to make space-based military platforms, the maintenance of hair-trigger nuclear alerts, the efforts to bully Russia with neighboring bases and missiles, the new arms race, and the U.S. and Israeli threat to use nuclear arms against Iran, among other matters.

He then rejects the possibility of an “eco-apocalypse” with the Panglossian thought that “when negligence makes the problem bad enough political will appears.” But the political will hasn’t yet shown itself, and this cliché phrase covers over very serious problems of power, competition, coordination among many conflicting polities, along with the possibility that a deadly “tipping point” might be reached well before any adequate “political will” materializes. If the future threat is still a bit uncertain, and if the power boys who dominate political decisions prefer to take short-term gains and the risk of future disasters, and if they can point to failures to go along by other countries, and if the short-term costs of meeting this threat are substantial, we may not see any political will for a long, long time.

Wright then comes to terrorism, where he finds the negative feedback loops

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more menacing. As noted, he does admit that our responses to terrorism as after 9/11 may contribute to the negative feedback, but he doesn't acknowledge that the wholesale terrorism of the imperial states along with neoliberal policies might be the real underpinning of "terrorism" (i.e., retail terrorism). These feedback loops could only be broken if the United States were to lead constructively, cease projecting power and forcing an arms race, terminate its aggressions and support of client state aggressions in the Middle East, end its support for the neoliberal counterrevolution across the globe, and take the lead in confronting the environmental threat. But if Wright wrote something like this he wouldn't be a guest columnist at the New York Times!



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