

Out of the wreckage

By tearing up the global rulebook, the US is in fact undermining its own imperial rule

The men who run the world are democrats at home and dictators abroad. They came to power by means of national elections which possess, at least, the potential to represent the will of their people. Their citizens can dismiss them without bloodshed, and challenge their policies in the expectation that, if enough people join in, they will be obliged to listen. Internationally, they rule by brute force. They and the global institutions they run exercise greater economic and political control over the people of the poor world than its own governments do. But those people can no sooner challenge or replace them than the citizens of the Soviet Union could vote Stalin out of office. Their global governance is, by all the classic political definitions, tyrannical.

But while citizens' means of overthrowing this tyranny are limited, it seems to be creating some of the conditions for its own destruction. Over the past week, the US government has threatened to dismantle two of the institutions which have, until recently, best served its global interests.

On Saturday, President Bush warned the UN security council that accepting a new resolution authorising a war with Iraq was its "last chance" to prove "its relevance". Four days before, a leaked document from the Pentagon showed that this final opportunity might already have passed. The US is planning to build a new generation of nuclear weapons in order to enhance its ability to launch a pre-emptive attack. This policy threatens both the comprehensive test ban treaty and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty – two of the principal instruments of global security – while

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endangering the international compact that the UN exists to sustain. The security council, which, despite constant disruption, survived the cold war, is beginning to look brittle in its aftermath.

On Wednesday, the US took a decisive step towards the destruction of the World Trade Organisation. The WTO's current trade round collapsed in Seattle in 1999 because the poor nations perceived that it offered them nothing, while granting new rights to the rich world's corporations. It was relaunched in Qatar in 2001 only because those nations were promised two concessions: they could override the patents on expensive drugs and import cheaper copies when public health was threatened, and they could expect a major reduction in the rich world's agricultural subsidies. At the WTO meeting in Geneva last week, the US flatly reneged on both promises.

The Republicans' victory in the mid-term elections last November was secured with the help of \$60m from America's big drug firms. This appears to have been a straightforward deal: we will buy the elections for you if you abandon the concession you made in Qatar. The agri-business lobbies in both the US and Europe appear to have been almost as successful: the poor nations have been forced to discuss a draft document which effectively permits the rich world to continue dumping its subsidised products in their markets.

If the US does not back down, the world trade talks will collapse at the next ministerial meeting in Mexico in September, just as they did in Seattle. If so, then the WTO, as its former director-general has warned, will fall apart. Nations will instead resolve their trade disputes individually or through regional agreements. Already, by means of the free trade agreement of the Americas and the harsh concessions it is extracting from other nations as a condition of receiving aid, the US appears to be preparing for this possibility.

The US, in other words, seems to be ripping up the global rulebook. As it does so, those of us who have campaigned against the grotesque injustices of the existing world order will quickly discover that a world with no institutions is even nastier than a world run by the wrong ones. Multilateralism, however inequitable it may be, requires certain concessions to other nations. Unilateralism means piracy: the armed robbery of the poor by the rich. The difference between today's world order and the one for which the US may be preparing is the difference between mediated and unmediated force.

But the possible collapse of the current world order, dangerous as it will be, also provides us with the best opportunities we have ever encountered for replacing the world's unjust and coercive institutions with a fairer and more democratic means of global governance.

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By wrecking the multilateral system for the sake of a few short-term, corporate interests, the US is, paradoxically, threatening its own tyrannical control of other nations. The existing international agencies, fashioned by means of brutal power politics at the end of the second world war, have permitted the US to develop its international commercial and political interests more effectively than it could have done alone.

The institutions through which it has worked – the security council, the WTO, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – have provided a semblance of legitimacy for what has become, in all but name, the construction of empire. The end of multilateralism would force the US, as it is already beginning to do, to drop this pretence and frankly admit to its imperial designs on the rest of the world. This admission, in turn, forces other nations to seek to resist it. Effective resistance would create the political space in which their citizens could begin to press for a new, more equitable multilateralism.

There are several means of contesting the unilateral power of the US, but perhaps the most immediate and effective one is to accelerate its economic crisis. Already, strategists in China are suggesting that the yuan should replace the dollar as east Asia's reserve currency. Over the past year, as the Observer revealed on Sunday, the euro has started to challenge the dollar's position as the international means of payment for oil. The dollar's dominance of world trade, particularly the oil market, is all that permits the US Treasury to sustain the nation's massive deficit, as it can print inflation-free money for global circulation. If the global demand for dollars falls, the value of the currency will fall with it, and speculators will shift their assets into euros or yen or even yuan, with the result that the US economy will begin to totter.

Of course an economically weakened nation in possession of overwhelming military force remains a very dangerous one. Already, as I suggested last week, the US appears to be using its military machine to extend its economic life. But it is not clear that the American people would permit their government to threaten or attack other nations without even a semblance of an international political process, which is, of course, what the Bush administration is currently destroying.

America's assertions of independence from the rest of the world force the rest of the world to assert its independence from America. They permit the people of the weaker nations to contemplate the global democratic revolution that is long overdue. #