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The Moment of Trump



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On 2 November 1963 Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated in a CIA-backed military coup. U.S. support for the coup was based on the idea that the elimination of Diem would open the way to the formation of a government which would be more popular, stable and open to U.S. advice. From the perspective of the United States the Diem government was incapable of mastering the Buddhist crisis that dominated the towns nor of creating an army capable of resisting the insurgency led by the communist- dominated National

Liberation Front which was sweeping through the countryside. But U.S. expectations were dashed as the coup led not to stability but to deeper political anarchy. Following the coup against Diem there were a succession of five more military takeovers which created utter chaos and forced the direct intervention of U.S. ground troops in 1965.

But the assassination of Diem unleashed anarchy not only in Vietnam but also in the United States. The Diem coup was followed almost immediately by the assassination of John Kennedy (23 November). The Johnson Administration which took power in the face of Kennedy's death was quickly faced with unrest at home led by university students and the black population of the cities saw war abroad as a key means of muting unrest at home. Internal unrest greatly spurred the impulse toward war which led to the launching of air war and ground invasion of Vietnam in 1965. Johnson's War Against Poverty at home turned into a war against the poor abroad.

Intervention in Vietnam far from stifling unrest within the United States actually opened the floodgates of mobilizations against the War and black revolt which shook the United States over the next six years. The War in Vietnam acted like a catalyst bringing to the surface popular resentment against the bureaucratic and militarized national security state and the racial and inter-generational conflicts that lay below the surface of Cold War American society. The aspirations of the New Left, the civil rights and black power, Chicano, sexual liberation, counter-cultural, feminist, gay liberation and indigenous movements far from being utopian high-jinks collectively constituted the agenda of twenty-first century socialism.

Today many see the upheavals of that time as a mere episode which went away with the end of the War. The broad spectrum of protest never crystallized into a common working class consciousness. Rather than organizing itself into an effective and broad-based revolutionary movement the various currents of 1960s protest fragmented into identity politics and dissipated themselves.

But the underlying contradictions of that time—class and racial divisions, militarism and imperialism—were never resolved. On the contrary, they were suppressed, continued to fester underground and have intensified over the years under the weight of the counter-revolutionary offensive of neoliberalism. Seen in this light the unrest of the Vietnam period should be seen as a signals crisis which prefigured the crisis in American society today.

Whereas the sixties were a time of relative prosperity for the working class and the mass of the population, economic difficulties and social disparities have greatly deepened in the

American population. The possibilities of large scale conflict including class conflict and social upheaval are now much greater than fifty years ago.

The American state is using foreign wars to distract from the increasingly fraught internal situation. Any idea that the United States will willingly retreat from its posture of aggressive militarism is belied by the fact that three generals sit in President Trump's Cabinet testifying to the over-riding influence of the military-industrial complex. Their presence is helping to usher in a new stage of the arms race involving a whole new level of military spending despite the fact that the trillion dollar defense budget already dwarfs that of all other states combined. The President has at his immediate disposition a 70,000 strong praetorian guard and large private mercenary armies as well an unlimited array of technologically sophisticated weapons.

Militarist rhetoric, guns and violence pervads American society and culture. The expanded growth of armed vigilante groups and fascist bands as in interwar Italy and Germany is an increasingly serious threat under the Presidency of Trump. In recent American history militarism and militarist adventurism has repeatedly been used as a means of evading internal social and political conflict at home and maintaining American influence abroad and is once more likely to be seen as a way out by the political and social elite. Ongoing war overseas is now built into the system.

Militarization is not merely a response to internal unrest. Recent years have seen a relative decline in American economic power as a result of the rise of China. In response to this threat the United States is pursuing a global policy of belligerent imperialism. With respect to Ukraine and the other borderland states of Russia, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Venezuela, China, Korea and the whole of Africa Washington has deployed vast military forces in an effort to extend its political control in the face of its declining economic position. Military and political dominance is to be used to muscle aside would-be competitors and create space for a global economic rally by the United States. The pursuit of this militarized foreign policy abroad is further fueling the militarization and violence at home. Indeed, the militarization of the police, growth of the carceral system and deepening of government surveillance and censorship has prepared the way for the transition toward a fully authoritarian police state.

There are signs such as, for example the populist repudiation of the pro-war candidate Hillary Clinton by the voters in the Presidential election of 2016 that this strategy may itself be failing. Furthermore the polarizing impact of the Trump Presidency can of itself help to precipitate class conflict. The social and political situation in the United States is

far more divided than it was during the Vietnam War. Despite its recent positive economic performance in many respects the United States- the heart of capitalism- which some believe is immune to socialist revolution is at the focal point of the crisis and is its weak point. Obama represented the last attempt to maintain the mirage of liberal reform. The election of Trump in the wake of Obama's failure signals the demise of the liberal order in the United States which up to now has been able to contain class and racial conflict. Clinton's defeat represents the collapse of the liberal ideology based on the idea that American capitalism could and would reform itself. In its place has developed a split in the ruling class between the failed liberal democratic elite and those rallying behind the new authoritarianism of Trump.

Since the crisis of 2008 the job market in the United States has recovered. But the overwhelming number of new jobs created have been temporary or low paying. Many young people as well as mature workers unable to find stable employment have dropped off the employment roll and have withdrawn from the system. Socialist ideology is particularly rife among the young. The liberal intelligentsia bemused by identity politics, clinging to cultural studies or neo-Keynesian economics, or even trying to revive the Cold War against Russia and China, have no capacity to address the crisis. The Democratic Party remains under the thrall of Wall Street, High tech multi-millionaires and Hollywood liberals. All pretence of reform has been abandoned by the ruling class.

Given the reactionary policies of the Trump Presidency we are already seeing an exacerbation of social and economic problems, an upsurge of protest from below and intensifying class struggle. In reaction it is highly likely that there will be an intensification of state repression. Indeed, the militarization of the police, growth of the carceral system and deepening of government surveillance and censorship has prepared the way for the transition toward a fully authoritarian police state. It will be rationalized as the need to preserve the constitutional legacy of the Founding Fathers. Already the United States is being characterized by credible analysts as a neo-fascist state with a mass base in the lower middle class (Bellamy-Foster 2017).

Under such circumstances, to wit, economic crisis, growing class conflict, an entrenched ruling class unwilling and unable to reform itself, an exhausted liberal intelligentsia and alienated younger generation, embittered racial and ethnic minority populations and a frustrated and impoverished working class, the United States seems headed toward internal political crisis one possible outcome of which is revolution. Even now in the Presidency of Donald Trump the United States has become a seething cauldron of class

and racial conflict. Indeed, a failed military adventure would be a catalyst for such a crisis as the population in such circumstances is unlikely to rally around the flag. Mass protest could develop as happened during the Vietnam War. Even without a revolution the result of such internal divisions could be a management crisis for the American empire. The United States falling into internal confusion could open the way for revolutionary change elsewhere in the empire as, for example, in Saudi Arabia or South Africa. The possibility of revolutionary change within the United States or of internal conflict within that gigantic country which is the core state of global capitalism needs to be considered a central question of global geopolitical analysis.

The accumulation of problem upon problem and struggle upon struggle makes the likelihood of a systemic crisis of the current capitalist order likely at some indeterminate point in the future. It is rather like the build-up of layer after layer of geological pressure prior to a major earthquake. Such a crisis should not be understood in simply economic terms or as a possible outbreak of international war, global revolution or environmental catastrophe. Rather it is likely to be combination of such factors – a civilizational crisis of grand proportions the nearest parallel to which would be an explosive mixture of the First World War, the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression rolled into one. Who can say when and how such an event could occur? It will come about no doubt in some unexpected way.

The events of half a century ago in Vietnam and the United States can throw a light on the present. The deaths of Diem and Kennedy opened the door to an enormous social and political upheaval against imperialism, racism and Cold War repression that mutated into identity politics including feminism, gay liberation and chicano and indigenous resistance. It issued finally in the environmental movement. All of these movements are still with us because the issues that provoked them are still present. American imperialism has never been more naked and omnipresent. Attacks on blacks and Latinos and other minorities have intensified. State surveillance has become all-pervasive and the level of police repression and incarceration enormous. Environmental controls which had gained some traction have been gutted by the Trump Administration.

The Johnson and Nixon administration led to a collapse in public trust of government from which it has never recovered. On the contrary there is a serious legitimation problem in the United States. The would-be alternative party-the Democrats-dominated by the Wall Street and California high-tech and Hollywood rich appears politically bankrupt. The ability of the Congress to address any of the major problems of American society has disappeared. It

is increasingly a discredited institution. Public education and infrastructure were abandoned and are decaying . The liberal academic and policy elite have been unable to come forward with convincing ideas for the reform of society.

Between the 1960s and now the problems facing American society were allowed to fester and grow. They pullulated within the tissues of American society. And they were enlarged by growing gap between rich and poor to the point where inequality has become staggering suborning the institutions of the American republic. The economic crisis of 2008 brought all these problems to a head. Nothing that has happened since has changed the situation including the partial recovery since in which productivity and growth levels have been below par.

Comparing the Vietnam War period with today we can say that the problems of American society have become far deeper than they were back in the 1960s. In that time Johnson's Great Society Program mitigated social polarization. Moreover jobs were much more freely available than they are today as the postwar economy reached its acme. The levels of debt and unemployment suffered by youth and especially working class youth. In other words the crisis of today is far deeper than that of the 1960s.

The result of this is that there has been a rapid and deep rise in working class consciousness. The majority of people today identify themselves as working rather than middle class as was true in the 1960s. The sense of opposition between working people and the rich has become overwhelming. In other words a powerful sense of class consciousness has emerged. During the Vietnam era there undoubtedly was some sense of this opposition among blacks, Chicanos and young workers drafted into the army. But despite the fact that the war was an imperialist war directed by the capitalist class this view was held only by a minority of blacks or students. Such a perspective was alien to the worldview of the white working class who remained aloof from or were hostile to the left in those days. Today the situation is entirely changed. Workers including the young are joining unions. A near majority of the young consider themselves socialist.

Under these circumstances the potential for social and political upheaval is considerable. It would not take much to set the ball rolling. The outrageous and unconstitutional behavior of Trump could be the spark. Another war might be trigger. It is true that there is no longer a draft as in Vietnam days. But it is clear that the American public has developed a deep distaste for endless foreign wars.

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