



SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY

the Beacon

Journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church

October 2021 • Price \$2

THE EVILS OF THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM



If we are genuinely committed to seeking the truth, we must ask what the history of capitalism has demonstrated. It has clearly exhibited the art of enriching a few and impoverishing the many. It has illustrated its dedication and determination to invade and colonise countries across the world. It has without doubt ensured that the world has become a more dangerous, unfair, corrupt, exploitative tool of the unscrupulous minority. Through successive wars of aggression, waged under the pretext of 'democracy' and 'freedom', it has illustrated its disdain for humanity and its thirst for more: more power and more profit.

It is inarguable that capitalism has presided over the slaughter and displacement of millions of people and engineered unnecessary wars. It is unchallenged in its destruction of our planet. It has failed to preserve our forests, failed to protect endangered species and it is responsible for polluting our oceans and national rivers. It has desecrated sacred sites, refused to endorse UN policies, used more and more destructive military weapons, diverted taxes from urgently needed social programs and refused to put its profits and vested political interests aside in the face of the worst global epidemic for 100 years. All of this demonstrates that we simply cannot afford to continue endorsing such a system. Our willingness to remain contrite in the face of our societal and planetary expiry will only lead to further despair, destruction and devastation.

We cannot afford to allow the minority to continue to mismanage, misrepresent and exploit the majority. We must look beyond this heinous system and plan for the kind of society whose major responsibility is to ensure all of its people can live dignified lives with secure, adequately paid work, efficient healthcare, affordable housing for all, free education from preschool to university, protection of our environment, provision of facilities for the aged, affordable cultural activities and community control over our needs. There are ample resources for all of these ... they simply need to be redistributed equitably.

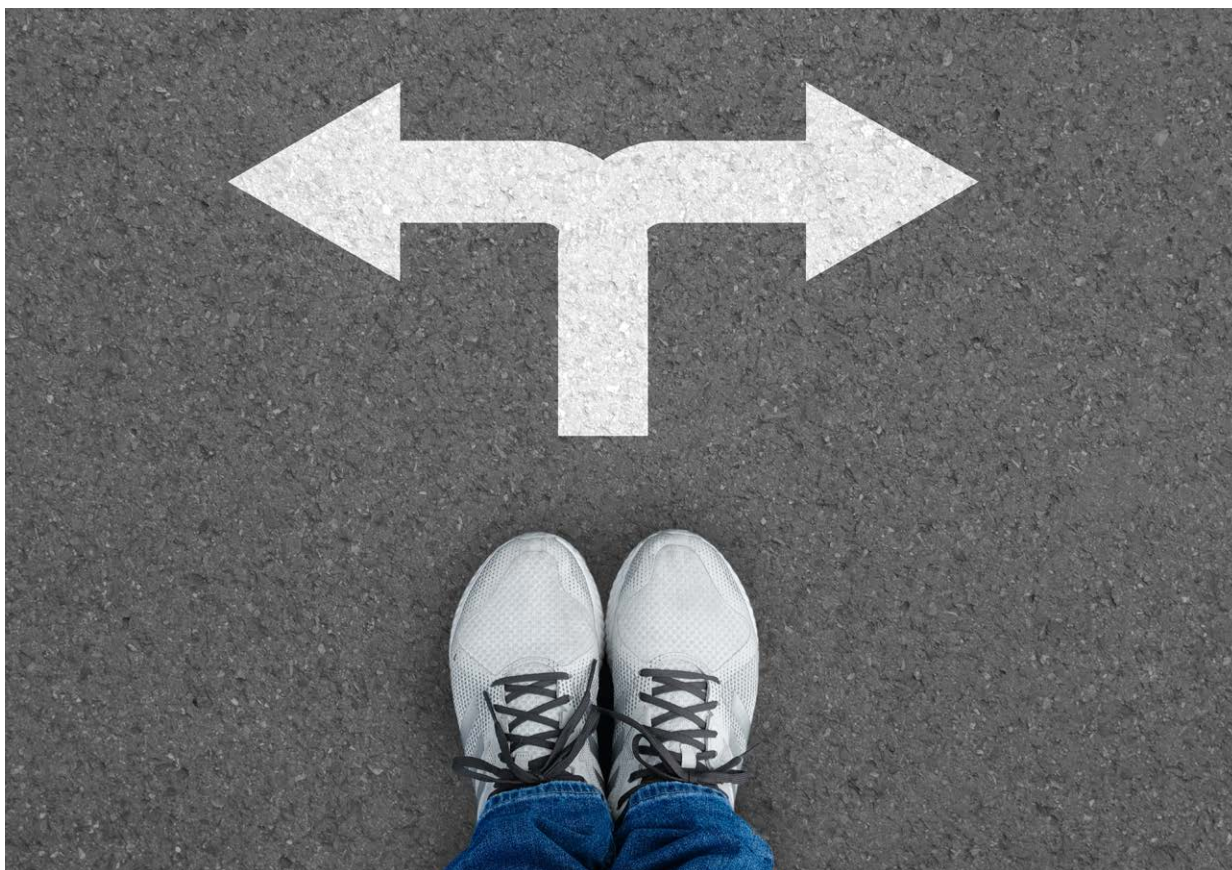
We must re-examine the role of the state, the police, the armed forces, the judiciary and ensure that they serve the people, and not a particular class. We must put an end to privatisation, which is wasteful, inefficient, and costly, and exists simply to allow private profiteering. We must insist on all the above because they are basic rights. In what community or nation can it be right for 1% of the population to own and control the 99% for their own benefit?

Many will ask how this can be done. Well, it won't be achieved by voting every four years for parties that have demonstrated their ongoing commitment to continuing the excesses of capitalism. It can be done by every concerned citizen calling for a new society, a new program, and one that provides for the needs of all and curbs the excesses of the old.

That is why we all need to play our part in exposing the excesses of capital, rejecting the politics of greed and demanding a new program that serves the people. What kind of society do you want for your children and grandchildren? The old or the new?

Are you prepared to go back to growing unemployment, inadequate healthcare, to tolerate growing homelessness, exploitation of our aged, unaffordable and inefficient utilities that were once owned by the public and the destruction of our planet? Or do we demand better? If there is one good thing the pandemic has done it has illustrated clearly that the controlling political class is not fit to continue. We need a new program that builds a society to serve all the people. ☺

EDITORIAL



DON'T LET A GOOD CRISIS GO TO WASTE

The recent decision taken by the Albanese-led Labor Party to embrace the Morrison government's third tier of income tax cuts to high income earners, and support negative gearing, is a reminder of the current major identity crisis the ALP faces. One explanation of what is going on is found in former PM Paul Keating's fervent defence of his record in government (*The Age*, 4 August). Freud reminded us that if we cannot remember our past, we will continue to engage in deeply irrational, even destructive choices and activity.

Keating has repeatedly taken credit for driving what he calls a 'reform process' after 1983, which embraced a mix of deregulation and privatisation. It is surely time to reassess the Hawke-Keating legend. Former PM Keating forgets too much. Paul Keating claims that among his successes was privatising the Commonwealth Bank, converting it into a 'world-class', 'competitive' bank.

Have we already forgotten the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and

Financial Services Industry findings about the CBA's record of criminality and fraud, including charging fees to dead people and selling credit card insurance to 64,000 unemployed people? Have we also forgotten that while right-wing governments (think Thatcher and Reagan) introduced neoliberal policies, the ALP governments of Hawke-Keating and Lange's Labour Party in New Zealand also did this.

Using the Accord as a protective shield, which it was claimed would protect workers, the Hawke-Keating governments (1983–1996) drove a reckless program of neoliberal change. This involved cycles of corporate and personal tax cuts, as well as introducing negative gearing. Those governments provided increased public funds to elite private schools, while cutting university funding with a view to turning universities into 'export industries' selling education to international students while imposing fees on local students. The introduction of HECs has already loaded up \$69 billion worth of debt onto young people's shoulders.

The Hawke-Keating governments also introduced an early version of punitive austerity policies based on harsh and punitive welfare benefits based on tough 'means testing' and 'activity tests' for those needing income support – policies adopted later in the UK and Europe. A tsunami of selling off public assets followed, while Keating's government set about deregulating the industrial relations system. The Hawke-Keating governments embraced public relations spin while promoting corporate grandiosity.

The most toxic legacy of all perhaps was to encourage an ethos of greed and competitiveness in newly corporatised health, welfare and education systems that had once been 'public services'. Today, we don't blanch when we see the local primary school with advertising billboards or worry about the decision to privatise some of our prisons. By 2021, the result is perfectly clear: Australia has been an increasingly unequal society, a result in part at least of abandoning the old Labor commitment to a 'fair go' – and any regard for its traditional working-class base.

Just as Keating cannot see what is now going on, neither can the current Labor leadership. Is it any wonder that the modern Labor Party has a confused identity? It is clear that Labor under Albanese is struggling massively to craft a clear and distinctively progressive political agenda. Unsurprisingly, an increasing number of Australians believe it makes little if any difference which party is in office, and that they now have very little real choice about who to vote for. This reflects the all-too-real absence of authentic debate about the key issues we now confront. A neoliberal political consensus about critical policy issues is not good for democracy. And let's not forget the loss of trust: increasing numbers of Australians no longer believe the leaders of the major political parties are speaking truthfully when they open their mouths. At least Labor has leaders in waiting like Penny Wong and Tanya Plibersek who are fearless in speaking truth to power.

The essential contest now is between the 1% who want to preserve their existing privileges in a deeply unequal system, and those among the 99%



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who can imagine what new kinds of institutions, political practices and fiscal policies that are more democratic, egalitarian and inclusive than what is currently on offer.

If we take Winston Churchill's advice and not let a good crisis go to waste, the current COVID pandemic is surely the right time for Labor to reassess what a modern progressive party stands for. The same it might be added is true for the Greens who seem inexplicably dedicated to remaining a minor party. In a far more polarised political culture, US President Biden has seized this opportunity. Biden has embraced a 'new green deal', designed to pump trillions of dollars into the US economy, a move designed as much to improve the lives of low-income Americans as to enable a transition to a fossil-free future. Let us seize the opportunity too. 🕊

Our church is a public and usable asset with portable seating and excellent conference, meeting and function facilities. We welcome its use by those who support our motto 'Seek the Truth and Serve Humanity'. Interested individuals or groups can contact the church office – we would be delighted to speak to you. A donation is payable.



When I was at Hamilton Primary School in the 1950s, we all wore camphor bags around our necks. The smell of camphor was widely believed at the time to ward off the threat of infection from polio, the horror disease of the time. It is estimated that up to 40,000 Australians developed paralytic polio between 1930 and 1988.

In Grade 5, our novel for English was *I Can Jump Puddles*, written by Alan Marshall, who had polio. It had a deep impact.

The camphor bags were an attempted remedy that had also been adopted in the 1918 flu pandemic to open the breathing passages as a deterrent to infection. It was mythical but was thought to be a possible protection against the scourge of polio in the 1940s and 50s. It possibly came from the days of the plague, when it was then assumed that infection came via inhaled noxious vapours, the miasmatic theory of disease. Something with a strong smell could counter the infection.

THE POLIO VACCINE

The first glimmer of hope for preventing the spread of polio appeared in Australia in 1954, when it was reported that a new vaccine was being tested on people for the first time. The story tells of how

'experiments' were underway in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide of the new 'Salk' polio vaccine and, although it was too early to announce any results and build up false hopes, the tests were 'proceeding satisfactorily'. The vaccine was eventually proven to be effective and in 1956 the Australian government launched a mass immunisation program for the prevention of poliomyelitis. All school children and preschool children were immunised as part of the campaign.

A major campaign was launched against the vaccine, intensified by the 'Cutter incident', but the effectiveness of the vaccine quickly became apparent. Dr Salk gave an interview to *The Atlantic* in 2014 to counter the spread of anti-vaccination conspiracy theories.

'Salk: ... The reality is that back in 1954, there was a huge double-blind study involving 1.8 million schoolchildren. The results were clear-cut: If you got the polio vaccine, you were protected; if you didn't, you were not. When you have that kind of data, you just can't say that the disappearance of polio is due to other things. What strikes me is – I don't know quite how to put this, but it's like there's an epidemic of misinformation, and we've got to inoculate the public against it' [*The Atlantic*, 28 October 2014].

SMALLPOX, THE MASS KILLER

Smallpox, which was estimated to kill some 400,000 people a year, was combated in the late 1700s by Jenner's cowpox vaccine. Although it was effective, many were afraid of it. David Isaacs, Professor of Paediatric Infectious Diseases, University of Sydney, relates the example of English satirist James Gillray, who famously depicted cows emerging from the bodies of terrified people being given the vaccine.

Some clergy proclaimed the notion of vaccination to be unchristian, as it came from an animal. Others claimed that the disease came from decaying matter, from miasma, so could not be related to vaccination. Others maintained that vaccination was a violation of their liberty.

The *Vaccination Act 1853* ordered mandatory vaccination for infants up to 3 months old, and the Act of 1867 that extended this age requirement to 14 years resulted in major resistance. Eighty thousand to one hundred thousand anti-vaccinators led the Leicester demonstration march of 1885, one of the most notorious of these demonstrations. Jenner was lampooned and a child's coffin was carried to illustrate the terrible dangers of vaccination. When there was a smallpox outbreak in the USA in the late 1800s, vaccination campaigns by government were met with resistance. The American anti-vaccinationists waged court battles to repeal vaccination laws in several states [*The Conversation*, 8 June 2021].

Of course, like polio, vaccination has practically eliminated the disease. Smallpox has not occurred since the 1970s, and polio is found only in Third World countries with poor medical services.

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY

There has been a flood of conspiracy theories and false news about COVID-19, spread on social media and by unscrupulous media outlets. This area has now become an area of academic study due to its prevalence in the USA.

One of the most widely accepted interpretations of *conspiracy theory* is 'an explanatory belief about a group of actors that collude in secret to reach malevolent goals'.

While conspiracy theories are not the preserve of the ideological left or right, they are more common at ideological extremes and certainly strongest at the extreme right.

The social identity approach (SIA) is one of the tools used in such study. The main assumption of the SIA is that each person not only has a distinct personal

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identity but also social identities that connect them to other people. Intense political partisanship can create the us vs them mindset which facilitates the spread of conspiracy theories. Periods of crisis stimulate the rise of conspiracy theories, combined with feelings of powerlessness or alienation from the mainstream of community life. Thus, belief in conspiracy theories is particularly high in members of stigmatised minority groups.

'Also "underground" extremist movements (e.g. groups of neo-Nazis, violent anti-globalists, religious fundamentalists, and the like) are characterised by excessive conspiracy beliefs. Theories causally contribute to the process of radicalisation, and the violent tendencies, of such extremist fringe groups' [*European Journal of Social Psychology*, December 2018 48(7):897–908].

Joseph A Vitriol, a postdoctoral research associate at Lehigh University, finds that changes to existing social and political arrangements can be very threatening to those who have benefited from the old system.

'We found that when one feels that society's fundamental, defining values are under siege, it is a strong predictor of a general tendency toward conspiracy thinking and endorsement of both ideological and non-ideological conspiracy theories' [*Science Daily*, 30 May 2018].

People who feel threatened by change, who feel that their position, ideological or social, is under threat, seek solace in the illusion of conspiracy theories. 🕯

WE ACKNOWLEDGE

Traditional owners of the Kulin Nation, past Warriors, Elders past and present.

HOW CAN WE ENSURE HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI ARE THE LAST NUCLEAR-BOMBED CITIES?

PART ONE



BY TILMAN RUFF

PART ONE OF A TALK GIVEN AT THE MELBOURNE UNITARIAN CHURCH ON 8 AUGUST 2021 VIA ZOOM

First, we must understand just how catastrophic the consequences of any nuclear war would be, and the real and growing danger, to know that nuclear weapons can only destroy and not ensure security for anyone, and that ending them before they otherwise end us is urgent. Then, know that this can be done and everyone can help, and get to work.

CURRENT EVIDENCE ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF NUCLEAR WAR

Nuclear weapons pose the most acute existential threat facing humankind and the biosphere. We desperately need policies on vital issues that are firmly rooted in evidence. Yet there is a gaping, irresponsible chasm between the facts of what nuclear weapons do and the growing dangers of their use, and the policies of the 41 nations that claim some unique right to threaten people worldwide with indiscriminate nuclear violence, or like Australia, assist others to do so. In 1983, the World Health Organization's first report on the effects of nuclear war on health and health services concluded that 'Nuclear weapons constitute the greatest immediate threat to the health

and welfare of mankind.'⁽¹⁾ They noted: 'It is obvious that no health service in any area of the world would be capable of dealing adequately with the hundreds of thousands of people seriously injured by blast, heat or radiation from even a single 1-megaton bomb' and that '... the only approach to the treatment of the health effects of nuclear explosions is ... the primary prevention of atomic war.'⁽²⁾

The more we know about the effects of nuclear weapons, the worse it looks. The most important new evidence relates to their climate impacts. Nuclear weapons are extremely efficient at igniting vast numbers of simultaneous fires over large areas, which would consume all flammable materials and coalesce into massive confluent fires within which no one could survive the > 800°C heat, intense smoke and oxygen depletion. Even the relatively small, tactical-size nuclear weapon exploded on Hiroshima, 15 kilotons of high explosive equivalent, released about 1000 times as much energy in the fires it ignited as the explosion itself.⁽³⁾ In Hiroshima, 13 km² burned completely. Detonation of the largest currently deployed 5-megaton nuclear weapon would result in a megafire more than 45 km across, covering 1600 km².⁽⁴⁾

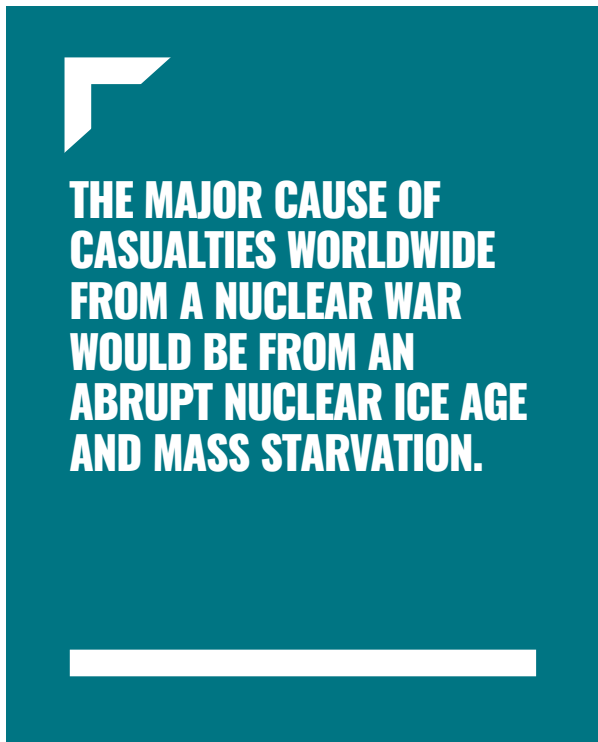
Atmospheric scientists have studied the effects of nuclear war between India and Pakistan. These two nations have gone to war four times since their independence in 1949, and mobilised up to 1,000,000 troops during crises on two further occasions. They possess two of the world's three most rapidly growing nuclear arsenals. Both have policies creating high risk of nuclear escalation early in a war between them, and violence erupts across their disputed border in Kashmir almost daily. The most up-to-date scenario involves 250 nuclear weapons, less than 2% of global nuclear weapons and less than 1% of their explosive yield.⁽⁵⁾

Depending on the size of the weapons used, such a war would produce between 83 and 183 million acute casualties in cities across both nations, including 52 to 127 million deaths. Radioactive contamination, severe social and economic disruption, and people fleeing on an unprecedented scale would extend across South Asia and beyond. The cities ignited would also produce between 16 and 36 million tons of black carbon in sooty smoke. This smoke would loft quickly into the upper stratosphere and mesosphere, beyond the reach of clouds and precipitation. The smoke would be further lofted and heated by 50–80°C by the sun, blanket the Earth for over a decade and reduce average global surface temperatures by 3–6°C, well within the range of coldest temperatures during the last glacial maximum 20,000 years ago, 3–8°C colder than present. Over much of North America and Eurasia, temperature would drop 8–15°C.

Global precipitation would also decline by up to 35%, with disruption to the South Asian monsoon on which food production for 1.5 billion people critically depends. Severe depletion of stratospheric ozone would cause an unprecedented increase in ultraviolet radiation (30–100% increases during summer outside the tropics), harming plant and animal development and growth both in water and on land.⁽⁶⁾ Agricultural production would essentially cease in higher latitude regions like Canada, northern Europe, Russia, China, Korea and northern Japan.⁽⁷⁾

Radioactive fallout and toxic chemical contamination from destroyed tanks, pipelines and industrial facilities would pollute large areas of agricultural land and the complex global system of distribution of fertiliser, fuel, equipment, seeds, pesticides, storage facilities, transport and trade, on which modern agriculture and food supplies depend, would be extensively disrupted. Over multiple years the total productivity of ecosystems would fall between 10 and 20% over the oceans and between 15 and 40% on land.⁽⁵⁾ This loss would be comparable to the total current human use of food and fibre. New effects that would exacerbate the situation continue to be discovered, such as recent findings of an El Niño-like pattern of unprecedented magnitude across the Pacific, dropping phytoplankton productivity in the tropical Pacific by 40%.⁽⁸⁾

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimated that in 2020, 720 to 811 million people were chronically malnourished, 118 million more than in 2019.⁽⁹⁾ The number of people experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2020 stands at 2.37 billion, 318 million more than the previous year.



THE MAJOR CAUSE OF CASUALTIES WORLDWIDE FROM A NUCLEAR WAR WOULD BE FROM AN ABRUPT NUCLEAR ICE AGE AND MASS STARVATION.

Global grain reserves never amount to more than 4 months' worth of consumption. Thus a relatively small localised nuclear war would put well over 2 billion people at risk of starvation.⁽¹⁰⁾ Such unprecedented famine would cause epidemics of infectious diseases, and very likely conflict within and between nations, exacerbating the toll.

While the blast, radioactivity, electromagnetic pulse from high altitude nuclear explosions and other effects would be catastrophic, the major cause of casualties worldwide from a nuclear war would be from an abrupt nuclear ice age and mass starvation. Nuclear weapons thus risk not mutually assured destruction, but self-assured destruction. They are essentially global suicide bombs⁽¹¹⁾, cannot be used for any legitimate or legal military purpose, endanger the security of all peoples, and render meaningless any idea of winning a nuclear war.

THE CURRENT RISK OF NUCLEAR WAR

The risks of nuclear war are widely assessed to be as great as they have ever been and growing. No nuclear armed state is disarming, or engaged in disarmament negotiations. The hard-won treaties that have constrained nuclear weapons numbers and types between Russia and the United States have been successively abandoned: the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, Open Skies Treaty, and the more recent Iran nuclear deal, which was providing effective constraints on Iran's nuclear program until it was abrogated by the Trump administration

Were it not for the incoming Biden administration's quick agreement to extend the New START treaty 2 days before it would otherwise have expired, there would currently be no treaty restraints on US and Russian nuclear weapons (90% of the total)⁽¹²⁾, in the current resurgent Cold War.



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All nine nuclear armed states are investing massively not just in retaining their arsenals, but in modernising them with new, more flexible and accurate capacities, in some cases able to be armed with either conventional or nuclear warheads, which overall lower the threshold for nuclear weapons use. Russia is testing and deploying entirely new types of nuclear weapons including long-range nuclear-powered cruise missiles, hypersonic delivery vehicles on ballistic missiles, and long-range nuclear torpedoes designed to explode in waters close to cities.⁽¹³⁾

Current global spending on nuclear weapons production and development was estimated at US\$72.6 billion in 2020, an increase of \$1.4 billion from 2019, even during the pandemic.⁽¹⁴⁾ In the US, nuclear warhead spending is currently at an all-time record level with projected expenditures over the next three decades of over US\$2 trillion to comprehensively refurbish the nuclear arsenal and weapon production facilities.⁽¹²⁾

Such vast expenditures on weapons that create a hazardous legacy just in their production have enormous social, environmental and public health opportunity costs. The average total annual investment required between 2019 and 2030 to fully finance achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) agreed by all nations is estimated at US\$1011 billion⁽¹⁵⁾, about half of annual military expenditures of US\$1981 billion in 2020.⁽¹⁶⁾

Leaders of all nuclear armed states have in recent years made specific nuclear threats, with military leaders confirming that nuclear first use and war-fighting are actively being planned.⁽¹⁷⁾ The authoritative Doomsday Clock was last year moved to 100 seconds to midnight, further forward than it has ever been before, with the assessment that ‘The international security situation is now more dangerous than it has ever been, even at the height of the Cold War.’⁽¹⁸⁾ This year the hands were kept in the same position, with the assessment that ‘The potential to stumble into nuclear war – ever present – has grown’.⁽¹⁹⁾ In 2019, the US intelligence community’s annual assessment of worldwide threats to Congress warned that the effects of climate change and environmental degradation increase stress on communities around the world, intensify global instability and the likelihood of conflict, causing the danger of nuclear war to grow. Indeed, over the last decade, the number of armed conflicts has steadily grown, particularly ‘internationalised intrastate’ conflicts – within a state but involving at least one nation (disproportionately nuclear armed) outside the state in conflict.⁽²⁰⁾

Another major area of increasing risk is the growing use of cyber warfare by states and non-state actors, which has included attacks on civilian and military nuclear facilities, including extensive hacking in December 2020 of the US National Nuclear Security Administration, which maintains US nuclear weapons.⁽²¹⁾ The complex dispersed and interlinked global systems of early warning, command, control, communications and intelligence related to nuclear weapons are vulnerable to cyber-attack. General James Cartwright, former head of US Strategic Command, has stated it ‘Might be possible for terrorists to hack into Russian or American command and control systems and launch nuclear missiles, with a high probability of triggering a wider nuclear conflict’.⁽²²⁾

At the same time, there are vast stocks of fissile materials, highly enriched uranium and plutonium from which nuclear weapons can be built, in civilian and military stockpiles in tens of countries. While civilian stocks of highly enriched uranium have been removed from a number of countries⁽²³⁾, there are no effective international constraints on the production of either of these materials, and the global fissile material stockpile in 2020 was estimated to contain more than 225,000 nuclear weapon equivalents of material.⁽²⁴⁾ ☹️

END PART ONE



AFGHANISTAN DEBACLE EXPOSES THE LIMITS TO EMPIRE

The chaotic scenes at Kabul airport are symbolic of a military intervention that has brought the people of Afghanistan nothing but loss and destruction. The United States and its allies, not least Australia, have a great deal to answer for. This twenty-year war has been an unmitigated disaster from beginning to end. And what an ignominious end it is, especially for the United States.

Almost immediately after the September 11 attacks President Bush formed a war cabinet to prosecute the 'war on terror'. They saw this as the ideal opportunity to demonstrate US power and resolve and reassert US leadership of the democratic Western world – all in the name of 'freedom'.

The irony of what followed is worth recalling. It was the United States which, in tandem with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, had provided 10 years earlier covert financial and arms support for the Islamist hardliners in Afghanistan. Their role would prove crucial in forcing the Soviet military withdrawal in 1992.

In the ensuing power vacuum and civil war, a group of Islamist fighters, predominantly of Pashtun origin, became established as the Taliban. Though known for their disregard for human rights and harsh treatment of women, the United States had no qualms secretly supporting them in the mid-1990s through its ally in Pakistan, and openly as time went on. In Washington's eyes, the Taliban were a convenient counterweight to Iranian and Shia influence in the region.

But with September 11, the geopolitical calculus changed. On 7 October 2001, the United States launched air strikes against Taliban military installations and al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. And so began 'Operation Enduring Freedom'.

This first phase of the 'war on terror' was the easy part. The toppling of the Taliban regime took little more than a week. But soon the going got tougher. Several Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders evaded capture, many of them taking refuge across the border in Pakistan.

Despite ever higher numbers of US and allied troops, the Taliban gradually regained and then extended their influence in Afghanistan. Large tracts of the country became prone to Taliban attacks. The spiral of violence had well and truly set in.

Though obscured by a succession of bland and misleading accounts by US and Australian officialdom, the ensuing chapters of this story make for grim reading. They also shed light on the lightning victory of the Taliban in recent weeks, and the tardy and humiliating attempts of the allies to evacuate their nationals, diplomatic staff and the poor Afghan workers who offered them their services.

The costs of this 20-year war, the longest in both American and Australian history, are incalculable. For the people of Afghanistan, they are horrendous. Innumerable lives have been destroyed. Civilians have been killed by crossfire, bombings, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations, and night raids into homes of suspected insurgents.

The Afghan death toll includes some 70,000 civilians, at least 66,000 national military and police, and well as over 50,000 Taliban and other opposition figures.

These are conservative estimates to which must be added an even greater number of injuries, spanning second and third-degree burns, broken bones, shrapnel wounds, brain injuries, paralysis, loss of sight and hearing, limb loss, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Public health estimates suggest that as many as two-thirds of Afghans suffer from mental health problems.

The UNHCR reports that since January, 400,000 have been forced from their homes, joining some 3 million Afghans already internally displaced across the country.

There are currently more than 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees – more than one in ten of all refugees, and the second highest number after Syria. There are many more who haven't been registered and thousands more who are heading to Kabul airport desperately trying to flee following the lightning victory of the Taliban.

This is but the graphic unravelling of a military intervention that had already destroyed livelihoods as a consequence of the war-induced breakdown of public health, security, infrastructure, and endemic corruption. Hardly surprising therefore that many Afghans should have turned to the narcotics business.

In 2018, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimated it to be worth more than the country's officially recorded licit exports of goods and services.

Narcotics are likely to have provided the Taliban with over half its revenues through organising cultivation, protecting harvests, and securing criminal supply routes into central Asia. Its military victory may now see a further expansion of the opiate economy.

US military intervention, it is true, produced some public goods. Sections of the population have enjoyed greater freedoms, millions of girls have received a school education, and not a few women have found employment in business, the professions, the entertainment industry, and even politics. Many more have access to clean water. There is no denying, however, that the Taliban are inheriting a broken economy, a dysfunctional civil service and a people traumatised by violence and a despairing sense of abandonment.

None of this is to suggest that the United States and its allies have been spared the costs of military intervention. The US Defense Department estimates that 2,442 US troops have been killed and 20,666 have been wounded since 2001. To this must be added the deaths of over 3,800 US private security contractors.

And yet, after fighting the longest war in its history, the United States stands defeated and humiliated.

How is it that the world's greatest military power, having battled continuously for twenty years, deployed hundreds of thousands of troops, sacrificed the lives and wellbeing of so many of its soldiers, spent well in excess of two trillion dollars, lavished hundreds of billions more on nation building, and raised, funded, equipped and trained an army of 350,000 Afghan troops, finds itself thwarted by a rag tag army of 85,000 fighters?

What this and other great power interventions – from Korea, to Vietnam, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Chad and Yemen

– strikingly demonstrate is the diminishing utility of military power. The occupying power may bring about regime change but this invariably comes with highly damaging blowback effects for both occupier and occupied.

In Afghanistan as elsewhere, military intervention, conducted at great human and financial cost, has simply accentuated local ethnic and religious divisions, heightened regional tensions, and fuelled great power rivalries. This is not an environment conducive to political stability, legitimate governance, or economic reconstruction.

The Taliban victory is the product of twenty years of misguided policy. The steady increase of foreign troops over the years and the application of evermore sophisticated weapon systems created a façade of power which concealed state failure.

At no stage was the United States able to create the conditions for good governance. The governments that were installed lacked credibility. The trappings of elections could not conceal rampant corruption and incompetence.

The US-supported government in Kabul and the military leadership were mired in internal divisions, undisguised opulence, fraud, and detachment from local grievances. The Taliban advance was the result of some fighting but mainly abject surrender. The people of Afghanistan are paying a heavy price for this misguided intervention. But so is the occupier. The United States has glaringly failed to impose its will on this poor, long-suffering, landlocked country. Its already tarnished prestige is in tatters.

The unedifying spectacle of its diplomatic staff in Kabul scurrying for safety stands in glaring contrast to their Chinese and Russian counterparts who are staying put. Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow are locked in intense discussions with the Taliban, possibly as a prelude to formal recognition.

At this eleventh hour will the US and Australian governments recognise the error of past policies? Will they contribute generously to a well-funded UN-led response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan?

Will they play their part in a long-term plan for the social reconstruction of the country which, whether they like it or not, will require a sustained dialogue with Russia and China on the one hand and the Taliban government of the other? The signs are less than promising. ☹

JOSEPH CAMILLERI

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Source: Pearls & Irritations

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Kindest regards

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THE EDITOR

I enclose \$30 for my subscription (\$10 concession + \$20).

Congratulations for your excellent edition on Palestine, which John Pilger called 'The Last Taboo' i.e. how does Israel get away with it? Why are so many journalists and commentators scared, and so many people who question Israel's behaviour, rebuffed. It needs another article.

Yours, etc.

G Stolarski, Vic

TO: BEACON EDITORIAL BOARD

Thanks again to the Beacon Board for recent editions: so refreshing and welcome during these times of COVID-19 restrictions.

I have often been concerned by the human rights implications of the imposed limitations which challenge our accustomed liberties, whilst trying to balance these with the undoubted responsibilities of governments for public health and safety.

Other *Beacon* readers with similar concerns may be interested in a radio program broadcast on ABC Radio National on Sunday 5 September 2021. The program was 'The Round Table', broadcast at 9:30 am. It dealt with several important issues, including over-policing during the COVID pandemic, and the implications for civil liberties and future societal relations. A panel of speakers included Pauline Wright, Prof. Mark Spears and Prof. Talia Anthony, and they each made very measured, thoughtful and helpful contributions to the discussion.

I found this to be a very interesting and thought-provoking example of probing current affairs commentary and urge any interested *Beacon* readers to seek this program on the ABC website:

www.abc.net.au/radionational/theroundtable

It should be quite easy to listen or download the show from this site.

J Endacott, Vic

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Vaccination and conspiracy

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Monthly journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church
Est. 1852

Registered by Australia Post

Post Print Approved

100003043

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