



# Neoliberal Geopolitics

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Let me tell you why military engagement with Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad is not only necessary and inevitable, but good. (Barnett 2003)

The invasion of Iraq by the US and UK was the subject of a seemingly unending stream of official justifications. Careening through the media like so many crash-test dummies, they ranged from narrowly nationalist calls for self-defense to apocalyptically universalist speeches about ridding the world of evil. Giving coherence to these trial-and-error efforts at legitimation was a freshly explicit American unilateralism that unsettled global business elites as much as it inspired an emergent global peace movement. Attorney General John Ashcroft, for example, apparently upset many of the secular evangelists of globalization at the World Economic Forum by appearing as a newly authoritarian and US-centric incarnation of "Davos Man" (Landler 2003). However, even as Bush-administration war promoters tussled with the great and the good of globalization at places such as Davos, other American voices sought to justify the war-mongering *in terms of globalization* as "not only necessary and inevitable, but good." Thomas Barnett, whom we cite here, a Pentagon advisor and faculty member at the US Naval War College in Rhode Island, was just one such influential voice.<sup>1</sup>

Barnett's work is our main example in this paper of a more widespread form of *neoliberal geopolitics* implicated in the war-making. This geopolitical world vision, we argue, is closely connected to neoliberal idealism about the virtues of free markets, openness, and global economic integration. Yet, linked as it was to an extreme form of American unilateralism, we further want to highlight how the neoliberal geopolitics of the war planners illustrated the contradictory dependency of multilateral neoliberal deregulation on enforced re-regulation and,

in particular, on the deadly and far from multilateral re-regulation represented by the “regime change” that has now been enforced on Iraq. Such re-regulation underlines the intellectual importance of studying how neoliberal marketization dynamics are hybridized and supplemented by various extraeconomic forces.<sup>2</sup> Rather than making neoliberalism into a totalizing economic master narrative, we therefore suggest that it is vital to examine its interarticulation with certain dangerous supplements, including, not least of all, the violence of American military force. We are not arguing that the war is completely explainable in terms of neoliberalism, nor that neoliberalism is reducible to American imperialism. Instead, the point is to explore how a certain globalist and economic view of the world, one associated with neoliberalism, did service in legitimating the war while simultaneously finessing America’s all too obvious departure from the “end of the nation-state” storyline.

Armed with their simple master narrative about the inexorable force of economic globalization, neoliberals famously hold that the global extension of free-market reforms will ultimately bring worldwide peace and prosperity. Like Modernity and Development before it, Globalization is thus narrated as the force that will lift the whole world out of poverty as more and more communities are integrated into the capitalist global economy. In the most idealist accounts, such as those of *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (1999:xviii), the process of marketized liberalization is represented as an almost natural phenomenon which, “like the dawn,” we can appreciate or ignore, but not presume to stop. Observers and critics of neoliberalism as an emergent system of global hegemony, however, insist on noting the many ways in which states actively foster the conditions for global integration, directly or through international organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization (Gill 1995). Under what we are identifying as *neoliberal geopolitics*, there appears to have been a new development in these patterns of state-managed liberalization. The economic axioms of structural adjustment, fiscal austerity, and free trade have now, it seems, been augmented by the direct use of military force. At one level, this conjunction of capitalism and war-making is neither new nor surprising (cf Harvey 1985). Obviously, many wars—including most 19th- and 20th-century imperial wars—have been fought over fundamentally economic concerns. Likewise, one only has to read the reflections of one of America’s “great” generals, Major General Smedley Butler, to get a powerful and resonant sense of the long history of economically inspired American militarism. “I served in all commissioned ranks from Second Lieutenant to Major General,” Butler wrote in his retirement,

[a]nd during that period, I spent most of that time being a high-class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers.

In short I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I suspected I was part of a racket at the time. Now I am sure of it. I helped make Honduras “right” for American fruit companies in 1903. I helped make Mexico, especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. The record of racketeering is long. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909–1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested. (quoted in Ali 2002:260)

If it was engaged in a kind of gangster capitalist interventionism at the previous *fin-de-siècle*, today’s American war-making has been undertaken in a much more open, systematic, globally ambitious, and quasi-corporate economic style. Al Capone’s approach, has, as it were, given way to the new world order of Jack Welch.

To be sure, the Iraq war was, in some respects, a traditional national, imperial war aimed at the monopolization of resources. It was, after all, partly a war about securing American control over Iraqi oil. Russia’s Lukoil and France’s TotalFinaElf will thereby lose out vis-à-vis Chevron and Exxon; more importantly, the US will now be able to function as what Christian Parenti (2003) calls an “energy gendarme” over key oil supplies to East Asia and Europe. Other, still more narrowly national circuits of American capitalism benefited from the war—including, for example, Kellogg Brown and Root, a subsidiary of Vice President Dick Cheney’s Halliburton that, having helped the Pentagon orchestrate the destruction of Iraqi infrastructure, is now receiving generous contracts to rebuild Iraqi infrastructure using proceeds from Iraq’s “liberated” oil sales. But these classically imperial aspects of the hostilities are not our main focus here. Instead, our central concern is with how a neoliberal world vision has served to obscure these more traditional geopolitics beneath Panglossian talk of global integration and (what are thereby constructed as) its delinquent others.

In the neoliberal approach, the geopolitics of interimperial rivalry, the Monroe doctrine, and the ideas about hemispheric control that defined Butler’s era are eclipsed by a new global vision of almost infinite openness and interdependency. In contrast also to the Cold War era, danger is no longer imagined as something that should be contained at a disconnected distance. Now, by way of a complete counterpoint, danger is itself being defined *as* disconnection from the global system. In turn, the neoliberal geopolitical response, it seems, is to insist on *enforcing* reconnection—or, as Friedman (2003:A27) put it in an upbeat postwar column, “aggressive engagement.” It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that even this vision is brand new. Much like the

broken neoliberal record of “globalization is inexorable,” the vision can be interpreted as yet another cover for the century-old package of liberal development nostrums that critics (eg Smith 2003) and apologists (eg Bacevich 2002) alike argue lie at the defining heart of “American Empire.” But what distinguishes this moment of neoliberal geopolitics is that the notion of enforced reconnection is today mediated through a whole repertoire of neoliberal ideas and practices, ranging from commitments to market-based solutions and public-private partnerships to concerns with networking and flexibility to mental maps of the planet predicated on a one-world vision of interdependency. Thomas Barnett merely represents one particularly audacious and influential embodiment of this trend.

Hyped in *Esquire* magazine as the author of “The Pentagon’s New Map” and boasting himself of proximity to Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz (the secretary and deputy secretary of defense), Barnett has articulated a stunningly simplified strategic vision that is fundamentally premised on the notion that, in his words, “disconnection defines danger” (Barnett 2003). His paper summarizing this vision has apparently been given by Barnett “about 70 times” inside the Department of Defense and at a range of other venues (Salit 2003). While the arguments in the paper have been dismissed as the products of a maverick analyst, and while Barnett himself quite likes to cultivate such a persona,<sup>3</sup> it also seems clear that the ideas underpinning the new cartography did not spring fresh from his head in early 2003. They have complex genealogies and, as such, reflect much more widespread neoliberal norms, attitudes, and ideologies.<sup>4</sup>

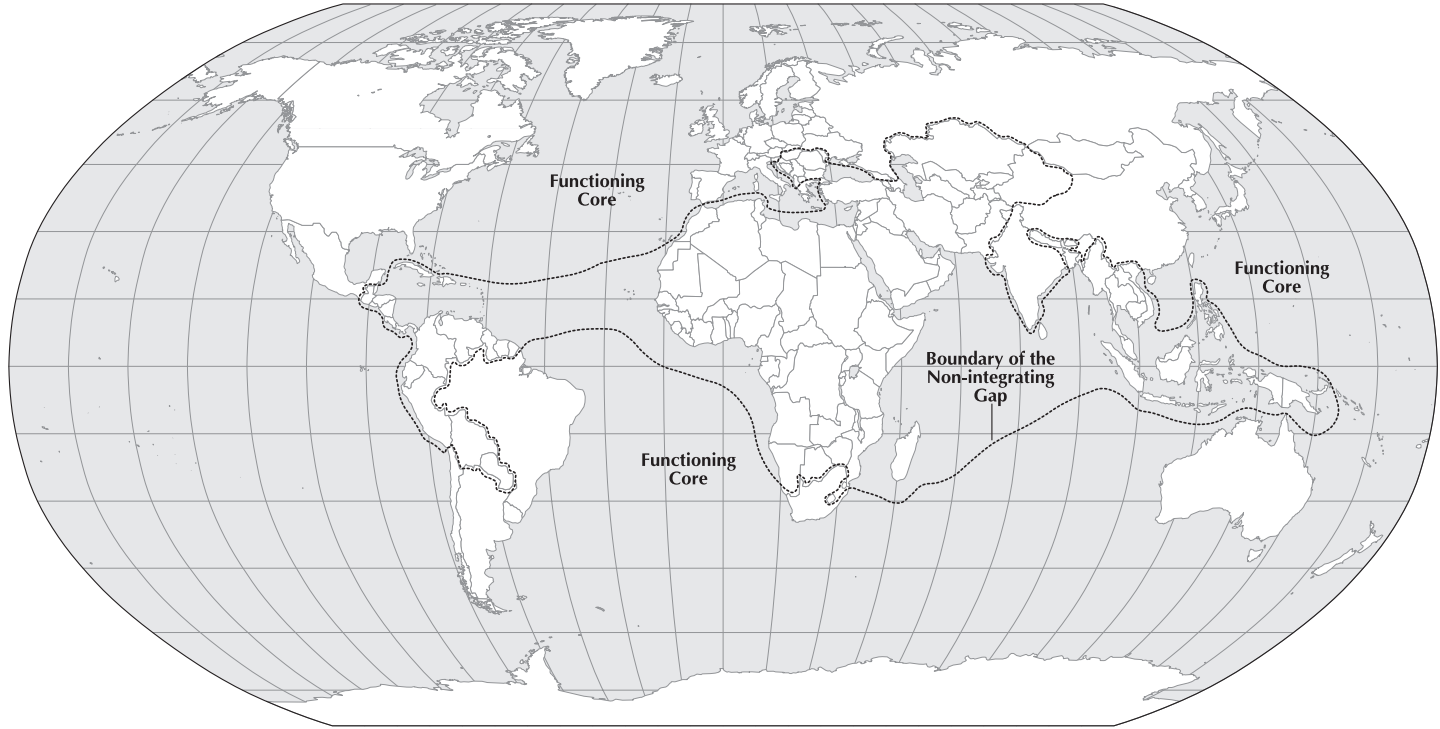
In January 2000, Barnett and colleagues at the US Naval War College set up the so-called New Rule Sets Project. This project was designed to bring together powerful agents from the domains of government (foreign policy, the military) and research (think tanks primarily, but also including some university centers), with peers from the private sector, most notably from the worlds of finance and energy trading.<sup>5</sup> The New Rule Sets Project was coordinated by the Decision Strategies Department (to which Barnett belongs) of the US Navy War College in collaboration with Cantor Fitzgerald, the New York City-based brokerage firm later to become familiar because of the enormous loss of life the firm suffered at their World Trade Center offices on September 11, 2001. Barnett describes the project’s rationale thus: “In the end, the military and financial markets are in the same business: the effective processing of risk. As such, it is essential that these two worlds—military and financial—come to better understand their interrelationships across the global economy” (quoted in Holzer 2000).

The New Rules Sets Project was about to enter its second phase when, shortly after September 11, 2001, Barnett was tapped to join the Department of Defense’s Office of Force Transformation (OFT) as

assistant for strategic futures. Here, he is part of a team configuring the pathways to a wholesale transformation of the US military. This team is one of several charged by Rumsfeld with developing ongoing plans to revamp the entire US military in order that it may effectively implement “network centric warfare as the theory of war for the information age” (OFT 2003). The overarching mission is to articulate the principles guiding “The (New) American Way of War” (Barnett and Gaffney 2003; Cebrowski and Barnett 2003). It appears that the mandates of the OFT are very much in line with Rumsfeld’s desires to develop the US military’s use of information and communication technologies, and relatedly to increase its flexibility and speed. Such changes are, in turn, based at least in part on plans put forward by the right, including the Project for a New American Century in their heavy-weight report *Rebuilding America’s Defenses*, issued in September 2000—a report that Wolfowitz was involved in producing (Donnelly 2000:90).

With its explicit title and descriptive cartography, Barnett’s *Esquire* article (2003) produces a neoliberal geopolitical vision centered upon mapping as explanandum (Figure 1). On a global map split into “The West” and “The East,” a dotted lasso distinguishes the “Non-Integrating Gap” from the “Functioning Core,” while a sprinkling of colored spots mark post-1990 US military engagements of various kinds (“Combat,” “Show of force,” “Contingency positioning, reconnaissance,” “Evacuation, security” and “Peacekeeping”). Broader rings encircle “future hot spots” such as Colombia, Saudi Arabia, and the eastern Mediterranean. Above the map key, Barnett makes his methods clear: “The maps on these pages show all United States military responses to global crises from 1990 to 2002. Notice that a pattern emerges ... Draw a line around these military engagements and you’ve got what I call the Non-Integrating Gap. Everything else is the Functioning Core.” The map is both that which is to be explained and the explanation itself, descriptive of the recent past and predictive of future action. For Barnett, the map reveals an indisputable pattern from which geopolitical knowledge can simply be read.

In the binary spatial model that the map enframes, “the Gap” consists of the following regions: the Caribbean, Central America (south of Mexico), South America (except for Brazil, Uruguay Argentina and Chile), Africa (except South Africa), the Middle East (including Turkey), the Balkans, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Armenia, the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, Nepal, Bangladesh, the Muslim provinces of Western China, and all of Southeast Asia. What remains of the world is, of course, the “Functioning Core,” supposedly characterized by low levels of US military involvement and high levels of global connectivity. It oddly includes such countries as Mongolia, Bhutan and North Korea. Perhaps the Gap’s lasso could have wiggled north in the East China Sea to capture North Korea, but



Map produced by Dick Gilbreath at the University of Kentucky Cartography Lab

**Figure 1:** Barnett's "Core" and "Gap." Redrawn from maps in Barnett (2003).

Barnett seems determined to maintain the Gap as a contiguous area, represented on his West/East globes as a dark blot seeping across the planet from the Caribbean to South East Asia. For Barnett there is no Gap in the Core, no Core in the Gap: no details that might disrupt his Mackinderesque bands of homogenized planetary difference.

The “safe/dangerous” logic of Core and Gap is animated by Barnett’s borrowings from the generic globalization as modernity metanarrative. As such, the map reflects his belief that “[T]his new world must be defined by where globalization has truly taken root and where it has not” (Barnett 2003). In clear psychosexual language and with what might thereby be called seminal logic, the Gap is also represented as a lack, a hole, a stain, and a site of rejection; in Barnett’s words, the countries most likely to provoke US military action are those that are either “losing out to globalization or rejecting much of the content flows associated with its advance” (Barnett 2003). In language that recurs throughout his publications and interviews, Barnett (2003) cites two reasons for the Gap’s rejection of these advances: “abject poverty” and “political/cultural rigidity.” Hemmed in by the “bloody boundaries” (echoes of Huntington) of the “seam states,” the Gap thus represents a (f)rigid and torrid zone, both wretched and resistant. The audience of Barnett’s map, by contrast, is effectively assumed as one more incarnation of the masculine authority figure, the heteropatriarchal savior that, as Donna Haraway (1997:132) argues, maps the world of fast capitalist technoscience with the god trick of perspective (see also Gibson-Graham 1996).

In keeping with the hawkish agenda of the Bush administration, Barnett argues (2003) that the goal of US foreign policy can no longer be pitched in terms of “containment,” but rather should entail a more aggressive “shrinking” of the Gap. Containment is ineffective because of the porosity of the “seam” between these zones. “It is along this seam,” Barnett writes, “that the Core will seek to suppress bad things coming out of the Gap” (Barnett 2003). These “bad things”—which include terrorism, drugs, disease, instability and (most abstractly) “pain”—are represented, in turn, in an economic idiom as the Gap’s “exports.” At the same time, in mechanistic systems-theory language, Barnett (2003) writes that bin Laden and al-Qaeda are “feedback” from the Gap to the Core: “They tell us how we are doing in exporting security to these lawless areas (not very well) and which states they would like to take ‘off line’ from globalization.” This statement not only highlights the technospeak in which Barnett’s geopolitics is announced, but also illustrates how the idioms of both export trade and information technology gloss over the naked militarism of the basic geopolitical argument being made. In an interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN (26 February 2003), Barnett explained that “We’ve got to shrink these parts of the world that are not integrating with the global economy, and the way you integrate a Middle East in a broadband

fashion ... is to remove the security impediments that create such a security deficit in that part of the world." Whether it is a question of "broadband" integration or of being taken "off line," it seems the problems of the Gap require more than a technological fix.

Barnett's neoliberal geopolitics is therefore ultimately calibrated to justify and promote the use of pre-emptive US military might across a huge swath of the globe. "Our biggest export is security," he says of America. Building on this neat gloss of one of the defining economic asymmetries of global commerce under neoliberalism (ie America's monumental trade deficit and its dependence on asymmetric investment capital inflows), Barnett goes so far as to claim that peace and prosperity can only truly blossom in areas where the US has established military ties, permanent military bases, and ongoing security alliances. "Show me the strongest investment relationships in the global economy," he (2003) says, "and I will show you two postwar military occupations that remade Europe and Japan following World War II." This appeal to history is useful in making the exceptional role allotted to the US in the neoliberal geopolitical vision seem as natural as globalization itself. Nevertheless, the problem of reconciling unilateralist American intervention with the broader multilateralist neoliberal picture of global integration remains something of a challenge. For Barnett, the solution takes a classically modernist Manichean form of dividing and distinguishing two different "rule sets" that apply in the Core and the Gap, respectively. The notion of "rule sets" is borrowed from cybernetics and works in tandem with Barnett's other high-tech references to networks, feedback loops, threat and security environments, and "system perturbations" (as September 11 is characterized). This systems-theory technovernacular enables Barnett to refer to the US as the "System Administrator," a metaphor that implies that the US alone has the ability to effect the rules and settings within which the other "users" on the network must operate. At the same time, the "rule sets" concept allows Barnett to parse the Core and the Gap into different security regimes.

Thus, the Gap is a "strategic threat environment," due to its inability to "harmonize" its "internal rule sets" with an "emerging global rule set" that Barnett (2003) equates in normative neoliberal fashion with "democracy, transparency, and free trade." In the Core, deterrence still makes sense (regarding China, for example). But in the Gap, for such countries as Iraq and Iran, even diplomacy is exhausted. "Simply put," says Barnett (2002a), "when we cross over into the Gap, we enter a different rule sets universe." Thus the Core and the Gap are two "distinct venues" in which the US is bound to act according to entirely different rules. Barnett (2002b) writes in the *Providence Journal*:

To accomplish this task we must be explicit with both friends and foes alike about how we will necessarily differentiate between our



security role within the Core's burgeoning security community and the one we assume whenever we intervene militarily in the Gap. Seeking two sets of rules for these different security roles is not being hypocritical but honest and realistic.

It might fairly be suggested that the ever-increasing circles of global capitalist prosperity imagined by other neoliberals cannot be effectively squared with this uneven and asymmetrical image of a divided world ruled by an aggressively assertive American systems administrator. Certainly, the common neoliberal imagined geography of the globe as a smooth, de-centered, borderless, level playing field does not seem to allow for such divisions and unilateral administration. But the inconsistency is not as great as it would seem at first. Faced with the same dilemma at the end of his own book on globalization, Friedman (1999:373) finesses the problem by arguing that the US military provides the "hidden fist" that enables the hidden hand of the global free market to do its modernizing business. And this pattern is actually quite common. It seems, in fact, that the double standard—"One rule set for us and one rule set for you"—is central to the wider neoliberal vision. It is worth recalling in this respect that liberalism itself was once similarly twinned, in the work of writers such as Locke and Mills, to a geopolitical division between an imagined liberal metropole and what was accepted as the necessary rule of authoritarian order in the colonies (see Mehta 1999).

Today, the spaces where the liberal freedoms cherished amongst elites in the Core are ignored and trampled include not just such places as Iraq and Afghanistan, but a wider set of neoliberalized sites as diverse as maximum-security prisons, aggressively policed inner cities, workfare administration offices, and—perhaps the most exemplary site of antiliberal authoritarianism of all—Guantanamo Bay. Such sites, we would argue, should be seen, not as exceptions to neoliberalism, but rather as neoliberalism's necessary spaces of exemption (cf Agamben 1998). While they might appear strikingly eccentric to neoliberal rhetoric about global governance, international human rights, and so on, they might be better interpreted as the unstated uncanny, implicit in all the Third Way fantasies about cosmopolitan peace. The so-called realism of Barnett—and, indeed, of the whole Bush team—might well be interpreted in this way as a brutal working out of the irrepressible inconsistencies in neoliberalism's idealist and multilateralist rendering of a new world order of peace and justice for all.<sup>6</sup>

In any event, the actual authoritarianism of the war in Iraq—combined, as it seems to have been, with a neoliberal geopolitical vision of reconnecting the dangerously disconnected—seems to reflect very well the double movement of what Adam Tickell and Jamie Peck (2002) call "roll-out" and "roll-back" neoliberalism. In their account, mediated as it is by a regulation-theory-type chronology, the main

roll-back phase of neoliberalism occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s in the form of free-trade deals, privatization plans, and the dismantling of the public sector. They depict the roll-out phase, with its domestic workfare schemes and newly aggressive penal codes, as occurring in the 1990s. Clearly, though, the ethos of roll-back neoliberalism continues to pervade public discourse in the West, including the Bush administration's present call for more tax cuts for America's rich, even as all kinds of authoritarian roll-outs—imprisonings, executions, welfare cutoffs, and so on—continue apace. Our suggestion here is that the recent war can itself be seen, in part, as a form of neoliberal roll-out—a roll-out in full military dress, to be sure, but a roll-out all the same, justified by the likes of Barnett as an intervention in the cause of forcibly removing obstacles to globalization.

As we said at the start, we do not want to claim too much for neoliberalism. It cannot explain everything, least of all the diverse brutalities of what happened in Iraq. Moreover, in connecting neoliberal norms to the vagaries of geopolitics, we risk corrupting the analytical purchase of neoliberalism on more clearly socioeconomic developments. By the same token, we also risk obscuring the emergence of certain nonmilitarist geoeconomic visions of global and local space that have gone hand in hand with neoliberal globalization (see Sparke 1998, 2002; Sparke and Lawson 2003). But insofar as the specific vision of neoliberal geopolitics brought many neoliberals to support the war (including, perhaps, Britain's Tony Blair as well as Americans such as Friedman), insofar as it helped thereby also to facilitate the planning and overarching coordination of the violence, and insofar as the war showed how the extension of neoliberal practices on a global scale has come to depend on violent interventions by the US, it seems vital to reflect on the interarticulations.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to John O'Loughlin for drawing our attention to Barnett's writings.

<sup>2</sup> We therefore fully concur with Wendy Larner's (forthcoming) argument that it is important to examine the ways in which neoliberal ideology has been *differentially* articulated with various other political projects, such as neoconservatism and the so-called Third Way. The articulation we are charting here with a still-developing form of American empire is just one of many possible rearticulations of neoliberalism, all of which call out for closer, contextualized study.

<sup>3</sup> See Salit (2003): "He's getting noticed, but not everyone appreciates Barnett's presentations. His detractors, some of whom stand up and walk out on his talks, say "he's an inch deep and a mile wide." He admits that he's not a true specialist or an analyst. He's more of a futurist." See also the letter to the editor of *Esquire* by Barnett's US Navy War College colleague, P H Liotta (2003).

<sup>4</sup> They also contain variations on many themes found in the publications and speeches of the members of George W Bush's security team (including Wolfowitz, Condoleeza Rice, Rumsfeld, and Richard Perle), as well as in the products of a suite of like-minded "experts" and "analysts," such as William Kristol and Robert Kagan, affiliated with

institutions such as the Project for a New American Century, the American Enterprise Institute, and so on.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the first New Rule Sets Project workshop (or “decision event”), on 1 May 2000, had participants from: (foreign policy) National Security Council, US AID, National Intelligence Council; (military) Under-Secretary of the Navy, US Naval War College, Center for Naval Warfare Studies, US Pacific Command; (financial) Cantor Fitzgerald, eSpeed, Poten and Partners, Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, NY Mercantile Exchange, Sino-American Development Corporation; (energy) US Dept of Energy, Caithness Energy Corp., Cambridge Energy Research Associates; and (research) Council on Foreign Relations, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Institute for International Economics, National Defense University, Columbia University, University of Mississippi.

<sup>6</sup> See also the critiques of Wendell Berry (2001), who has argued that “An economy based on waste is inherently and hopelessly violent, and war is its inevitable by-product. We need a peaceable economy.”

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