

***Capitalism, Socialism
And the 'End of History'***

By Robert Bills

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The following is the text of an address delivered by National Secretary Robert Bills at the Socialist Labor Party’s 44th National Convention Banquet, held at the Biltmore Hotel in Santa Clara, Calif., Saturday, April 10, 1999.



When starting work on this talk a few days ago, two things naturally came to mind.

The first thing that rushed in on me was the war on Yugoslavia. The other was the publicity piece we sent out for this affair—about the end of the 20th century and all the unresolved problems we seem destined to drag along with us into the 21st.

War, of course, was on the original list of things to mention. There have been plenty of them since the 20th century got its start nearly a hundred years ago, and war obviously is not one of capitalism’s redeeming or most endearing features.

Whenever one of these wars comes along it’s just good politics to blame it on someone or something else. Eight years ago it was Saddam Hussein and his ambition to gobble up Kuwait. That was the Gulf War; but, if you remember, Saddam Hussein was supposed to be a friend of American capitalism when the United States thought Iraq’s neighbor and its leader—Iran and the Ayatollah Khomeini—were a bigger menace to what the politicians and the pundits like to call “our interests,” or “our national interests”—in someone else’s country.

So, when things changed along the Persian Gulf, this friend of the West, this bulwark against the ayatollah and the threat of militant Islam—Saddam Hussein—was suddenly transformed into Saddam Hussein, the devil incarnate, whose covetous move on the oil fields of Kuwait was “the cause of the war.”

Fact was, of course, that Saddam Hussein was no different before the Gulf War than he was after it. Fact is, too, that American capitalism has

never had much trouble snuggling up to petty tyrants in the Middle East or anywhere else—at least not in this century. The United States has backed up and shored up any number of them over the years and all over the place—from Pinochet down in Chile to Mobuto over in Africa, from Ferdinand Marcos across the Pacific in the Philippines to Francisco Franco across the Atlantic in Spain.

Something similar might be said about Slobodan Milosevic, the president of what's left of Yugoslavia. Four years ago—as someone on the radio reminded me a few days ago—Milosevic was “our man.” He's the one the United States and its friends in Western Europe were counting on to make the Dayton Peace Accords work. That was the treaty that was supposed to insure the peace in Bosnia after a war that had gone on for four years, end the “ethnic cleansing” and bring capitalist stability to the Balkans.

The relationship with Milosevic may never have been as cozy as it was with, say, Somoza in Nicaragua or Noriega in Panama, but as the fellow on the radio said, he was “our man”—“our man” in Belgrade, just as Juan Batista used to be “our man” in Havana, Cuba, and Trujillo had been “our man” in the Dominican Republic.

But Milosevic isn't “our man” any more. Now he's the “Bully of the Balkans,” as *Newsweek* called him, and some have called him worse. No doubt Milosevic is deserving of some of those epithets, and a few more besides. But that's not the point. The point is that “our man” in Belgrade, just like “our man” in Baghdad before him, is supposedly the cause of the war. That's what the newspapers and the magazines say. And that's what the TV commentators and news anchors tell us.

So again the United States is at war—and again it's someone or something else that is to blame.

I'll come back to this.

There were two other ideas I couldn't get out of my head when I started piecing together what I wanted to say this evening—before the bombing started. They were ideas I thought might help explain some other unresolved social problems we'll be taking along into the 21st century—why we still have them and what might be done to get rid of them. Maybe those two ideas will help us understand the war and what it means—what it says about the future and about the choices open to us.

One of those two ideas was really the name of a book that received a lot of attention 10 years ago. It was written about the time the Berlin Wall came down, just a few years before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was written by a former official of the State Department whose name is Francis Fukuyama.

Fukuyama called his book *The End of History and the Last Man*, and he said that “liberal democracy” may be the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and, therefore, the “final form of human government.”

Fukuyama said democracy, but he didn’t mean democracy, at least not democracy all by itself. He meant capitalism, but a certain type of capitalism. He meant capitalism as we know it in the United States, as it is in Western Europe and in Japan. He called it “liberal democracy” to distinguish it from capitalist societies in which the government—the state—is run by dictators and tyrants, even though the factories and the farms might be owned by private individuals—by a capitalist class. And I suppose he meant to include some 20th-century societies that were not capitalist, such as in China, Cuba and the former Soviet Union.

The idea behind Fukuyama’s book was that this “liberal capitalism” was the last stop on the road of history—that people will never find a better way to organize the society in which we live and no better form of government to administer it.

Some of you may recognize that Fukuyama’s idea wasn’t a new one. It’s been said before in different ways, and we’ve been hearing it a lot in recent years.

What Fukuyama said was just another way of saying that, “Capitalism is the best of all possible systems.” In other words: “Capitalism is as good as it gets, folks. It’s here to stay, so you may as well get used to it.”

The other idea that came to mind as I was thinking about the war, what it says about the world we live in, and about the future, was something Karl Marx had written in a little book more than 150 years ago.

The book I have in mind wasn’t the *Communist Manifesto*, and it didn’t make much of a splash—not like Fukuyama’s. But, in a way, it answered Fukuyama and his “end of history” long ago. Or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe Fukuyama thought he was answering Marx. Either way, it shows that Fukuyama’s idea about history, about capitalism, and about

capitalism's idea of democracy, was used goods.

Karl Marx didn't write his book in answer to Fukuyama, obviously, but he did write it in answer to a book by someone else—a French philosopher named Pierre Proudhon. Some of you already know about these two books. Proudhon called his *The Philosophy of Poverty*, so Marx—who was anything but the humorless stoneface that some seem to think—indulged himself in a little merriment by calling his book *The Poverty of Philosophy*.

The idea from Marx's book that came to mind was this:

“When the economists say that present-day relations—the relations of capitalist production—are *natural*, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves *natural laws* independent of the influence of time. They are *eternal laws* which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any.”

What Marx meant by relations were economic, political and social relations—basically, the relationship between the capitalist class that owns and controls the factories and farms, and the working class that needs to work in the capitalist-owned workplaces to earn a living. What he was saying is that those who speak for capitalism—its economists, but also its politicians and professors, the newspaper and magazine writers, and today we can throw in the nightly news anchor on the TV—are there to convince us that capitalism is as natural as trees in a forest and fish in the sea.

And he was also saying that this idea of capitalism being nature's way for humanity—as if human society were a two-legged version of the ant hill—was wrong.

He meant that the evolution and development of human society would not end with capitalism, that capitalism would be replaced by another social system—just as capitalism had replaced feudalism, the system that came before capitalism and out of which capitalism developed.

He was saying that this old Proudhon-Fukuyama idea was nothing but a prejudice, very much like the prejudice the aristocrats and nobles of feudalism had about themselves. They believed in the “divine right of kings”—that their lording it over humankind was ordained by God. The only difference between the idea the old kings and queens had about themselves,

and the idea that the uncrowned kings and queens of factories, farms and banks had about themselves, was a semantic one—the difference between God and nature, which was no difference at all.

So, who was right, and what does it matter? What has it to do with the war on Yugoslavia, or with all the other problems we'll be packing along into the 21st century?

Well, if war and tyrants, pollution and poverty, falling wages and repetitive economic crises, racism, rotting cities and human misery—in short, if capitalism is as good as it's going to get, and if capitalism is the end and there is no more—the least that can be said is that we've got nothing to lose by taking a closer look at the Marxist point of view. And if Marx was right we may have a new world to win.

So let's start by taking a closer look at war—the one we're in now, and some others from the 20th century. To put it into perspective, allow me to introduce the subject with something that we said in *The People* four years ago:

“The war in Bosnia continues to grab the headlines. However, the significance of the four-year-old war on the Balkan Peninsula is not in the fighting, as devastating as it has been for those directly engaged in or affected by the violence and carnage. What should concern the working class of the United States—and those of all other countries—more than the present dispute over the territories of the former Yugoslavia is what that contest reveals about the emerging realignment among the capitalist powers in the post-Soviet era, and the ominous implications this realignment has for the future.

“Fifty years after the end of World War II it may seem far-fetched to suggest a resumption of pre-Cold War hostilities among the major capitalist powers. Competitive struggles with global implications may have seemed more plausible during the period of nuclear brinkmanship and stalemate, when the capitalist nations of Western Europe were allied with and very much dependent on the military power of the United States. But the force of circumstances imposed by the Soviet presence, coupled with the devastation of World War II that preceded its superpower status, only suppressed the capitalist sources of earlier conflicts. Those circumstances did not and could not end the profit-motivated compulsions of the capitalist system. Capitalist rivalry for markets, sources of raw materials and spheres of influence caused the two world wars of the 20th century, and whatever restraint was placed on those compulsions following the Second World

War died the moment the Soviet flag was hauled down from the Kremlin five years ago [in 1991].”

That’s what we said then.

This new war, we’re told, is being waged by NATO—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—but everyone knows it is being waged primarily by the United States.

NATO has been in the news a lot since the war on Yugoslavia began a few weeks ago. But many people—especially younger people—don’t know much about it, or about Yugoslavia, or about the war.

NATO has been around awhile. It was set up 50 years ago, in 1949. That was just a few years after the end of World War II and at the beginning of a new war—a different kind of war—a war that became known as the Cold War.

NATO is a military alliance. It is supposed to be a partnership between the United States and the capitalist countries of Europe. It was supposed to defend Europe against the Soviet Union.

But NATO was never used before this new war on Yugoslavia. It wasn’t used when anti-Soviet rebellions broke out in East Germany, Poland and Hungary in the 1950s, or in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s.

There were two reasons for that. One, of course, was the threat of nuclear war—a nuclear holocaust that would have settled all differences for all time.

The other was that, for all the talk about Soviet tyranny and oppression, the Soviet Union helped maintain order in a world that might otherwise have fallen into chaos and anarchy.

In World War II, the United States, Great Britain and Russia defeated Germany and its allies. Russia wasn’t Russia in those days, of course. It was the Soviet Union, and it had been the Soviet Union since 1917—or since the middle of another war, the First World War, that got started in 1914 and ended in 1918.

If you know a little about history, the history of the 20th century, you know that World War I and World War II were alike in certain ways.

Just like World War II, World War I was a war in which the United States, England and Russia fought against Germany. Russia was an empire when it started, with a king—an absolute monarch—who was called the czar.

Some other countries were involved, too. In fact, almost every country in Europe got caught up in it.

France, for example, also fought against Germany; but Germany didn't fight alone. It had some friends. One was Turkey, which, back then, had another name. Back then it was called the Ottoman Empire.

Germany had another friend that fought with it in World War I called the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

When that war was over, some of the countries that lost were wiped off the map. They disappeared or were broken up into new countries. Parts of Germany and Russia became Poland. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up into Austria and Hungary. A big piece of it became known as Czechoslovakia, and some other pieces were taken over by another country called Serbia.

Serbia is in the news. It is the main part of Yugoslavia. Another part of Yugoslavia is called Kosovo, and that has been in the news, too. In fact, the reason for the war on Yugoslavia today is supposed to be that the Serbians are trying to push the people of Kosovo out so that Serbians can move in; and the government of Yugoslavia has been not only pushy, but brutal about pushing them out.

Serbia was in the news back when World War I got started. It was in the news because a Serbian shot and killed the man who was next in line to become the emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—the Archduke Ferdinand. The Serb was a nationalist—someone who thought that a part of Austria belonged to Serbia—a part that was called Bosnia—the same place where the war was fought five years ago, and where President Clinton sent about 2,000 soldiers who were only supposed to stay for one year—but they're still there.

There were some people who said that World War I got started because the Serbian nationalist shot the Austrian prince. But that wasn't true. That war got started for much bigger reasons, and the man who said it best was the man who happened to be the president of the United States at the time. His name was Woodrow Wilson, and what he said about what caused World War I was this:

“Why, my fellow citizens, is there any man here, or any woman—let me say,

is there any child here—who does not know that the seed of war in the modern world is industrial and commercial rivalry?”

Wilson was right—as far as he went—but he didn’t tell it to the soldiers who fought and died in the war. The politicians and the newspapers, the college professors and the preachers told the soldiers, told the families of the soldiers, told the millions of men, women and children who made up the American working class and the working classes of Europe, that the war was fought to stop an evil man—the king of Germany, the Kaiser—and to “make the world safe for democracy.”

In fact, Wilson didn’t tell the truth about the war until after it was over and millions of working-class men, women and children had been killed—not to make the world safe for democracy, but to make it safe for the industry and commerce of capitalism.

The Socialist Labor Party said just about the same thing. One big difference was that the SLP didn’t wait until the war was over. It said it before the war, during the war *and* after the war. We said it at our meetings, in our literature and in our newspaper, *The People*. And there was another difference.

The SLP also said there was a solution—a way to prevent future wars. The SLP said that the way to end war was to replace capitalism with socialism, and it offered its program—the Socialist Industrial Union program—as the means to get rid of capitalism and to get to socialism. But the government didn’t like it and they tried to stop us by taking away our permit to distribute *The People* through the U.S. mail.

Then came the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War in the 1940s. But instead of Kaisers and emperors it was dictators and tyrants—Hitlers and Mussolinis. Instead of “ethnic cleansing,” it was “the final solution”—the cold-blooded mass extermination of European Jews, Gypsies, Socialists and workers.

Hitler said it was the Jews and the Socialists that brought the depression to capitalist Germany, and the German working class fell for it—hook, line and sinker. When he marched his armies into Poland in 1939, the capitalist classes of Europe and America said that Hitler, his Nazis and their plans to gobble up the whole continent of Europe were the cause of the war.

Capitalism had nothing to do with it. It was evil men with evil designs.

But that wasn't true, either.

That war also got started for much bigger reasons—reasons having nothing to do with democracy or despots, and everything to do with the industrial and commercial competition mentioned by Woodrow Wilson. That was the kindling wood of the war—and even Hitler, who lit the spark that set it off—confessed as much when he said: “Germany must live; that means export or die.”

What German capitalism and its tyrant knew, American capitalism and the “liberal Democrat” who led its government knew just as well. And in the middle of the bloodletting the federal government reminded the ruling class of the truth by putting it on paper—and it said, and I quote: “This is more than a war of mechanical monsters clashing in the night. . . . It is a war for markets—*your* markets!”

That was right—as far as it went—but it wasn't told to the soldiers who fought and died in the war. The politicians and the newspapers, the college professors and the preachers told the soldiers, told the families of the soldiers, told the millions of men, women and children who made up the American working class and the working classes of Europe, that the war was fought to stop an evil man—Adolph Hitler—and to save the world from fascism. When it was over, millions of working-class men, women and children had been killed—not to save the world from dictators and despots, but to make it safe for the industry and commerce of capitalism.

And again, the Socialist Labor Party said just about the same thing. One big difference was that the SLP didn't wait until the war was over. It said it before the war, during the war and after the war. We said it at our meetings, in our literature and in our newspaper, *The People*. And the SLP also said there was a solution—a way to prevent future wars. The SLP said that the way to end war was to replace capitalism with socialism, and it offered its program—the Socialist Industrial Union program—as the means to get rid of capitalism and to get to socialism.

But by then we had the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war, and a new rivalry with what Ronald Reagan would call the “evil empire.” And there was something else—a new tool to distract the working class—the lie that the Soviet Union represented socialism.

Nonetheless, the SLP did what it had always done. It confronted the lie and it fought on.

Then the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War was suddenly over. When the end came, the SLP said the change had kicked a major prop from under the capitalist system without which all of capitalism's contradictions would soon come to a head. And the SLP was right.

Today, what George Bush proclaimed would be capitalism's "New World Order" is disintegrating into global chaos, anarchy and social collapse. The evidence is everywhere and too great to ignore. From Serbia and Kosovo in southern Europe to Rwanda and the Congo in the middle of Africa, to the newly resumed war on the Horn of Africa between Eritrea and Ethiopia—at the opening of the Arabian Sea onto the Indian Ocean and governing the approaches to the Suez Canal—entire countries have been ripped apart, thousands of people are being massacred in seemingly senseless wars, and millions have been transformed into refugees from anarchy and chaos.

You may remember when *The People* quoted one United Nations official who said:

"The Cold War ended and everyone said, 'Oh, terrific. We'll have prosperity, democracy and sharing.' Instead, they looked up after a few years and saw a new world anarchy."

Then there was *The Washington Post*, which had this to say:

"Since the United States and the Soviet Union ended a rivalry that shaped the politics of sub-Saharan Africa through much of the last 30 years, the region has struggled to find a new basis for stability and development free of foreign tutelage. . . . [Today] governments, economies and even whole countries artificially forged by European colonizers in the 19th century, and propped up since achieving independence a generation ago by the patronage of outside powers, are beginning to fragment."

According to this report, a major reason for this breakdown in Africa is that the capitalist powers turned their backs on countries they formerly found useful in their sparring with the Soviet Union for control of the continent's vast resources.

In other words, while pretending to defend democracy and freedom

against Soviet tyranny, conquest and oppression, the United States and former colonial powers installed—and were responsible for—repressive regimes throughout much of Africa—no better and no worse than those that leaned on the Soviets.

And now we have Yugoslavia, Milosevic and his “ethnic cleansing.” Now we have capitalist critics of the Clinton administration saying American imperialism—its so-called foreign policy—is adrift and has no clear-cut purpose. But that, too, is wrong.

American imperialism has the same aim and purpose it had when Woodrow Wilson confessed it after World War I and when the federal government confessed it in the middle of World War II. It is the same purpose that existed during the Cold War—and it has nothing to do with “democracy,” or “humanitarianism.” And now the truth is starting to come out. It’s starting to come out because the war isn’t going quite the way Washington and NATO thought it would. Now there are cries for all-out war—not to save the people of Kosovo, but to keep all of Europe from falling into chaos and anarchy.

An example comes from *The New York Times* of April 7—just a few days ago. It comes from the pen of Robert Kaplan, who the Times identified as a correspondent for *Atlantic Monthly*. Kaplan is not alone in this, but he was more than blunt—and he said why he was being blunt. What he said, among other things, was this:

“The humanitarian nightmare in Kosovo may be reason enough for NATO’s involvement in the former Yugoslavia, but for the United States there are vital strategic stakes involved as well. These stakes justify the use of any NATO measures needed to defeat Serbia, including the use of ground troops, because nothing less than the future contours of Europe are now being decided.

“Appeals to conscience will not keep Greece...nor will they keep Romania and Bulgaria from slipping into the sway of Russia. What is required is nothing less than complete NATO military victory.

“Thus, if the bombing campaign fails and NATO gives up at the negotiating table, it would seal Europe off according to medieval lines, with the newly expanded NATO a mere variation of the old Holy Roman Empire—the old Christian West, that is—and with the Near East beginning where the old Ottoman Empire once did, roughly on the border between Croatia and Serbia and somewhere in Transylvania where ethnic Hungarians meet Romanians.

“...That same demarcation between East and West will reemerge unless Mr.

Milosevic is crushed with air and ground troops and a NATO protectorate is established in Kosovo and Macedonia. Only Western imperialism—though few will like calling it that—can now unite the European continent and save the Balkans from chaos.”

I don't know about you, but if this is the “end of history” that Francis Fukuyama had in mind when the Berlin Wall came down, I want no part of it.

A few years before the 20th century began, in a little speech he made on *Reform or Revolution*, Daniel De Leon said this:

“We Socialists are not reformers; we are revolutionists. We Socialists do not propose to change forms. We care nothing for forms. We want to change the inside mechanism of society; let the form take care of itself. We see in England a crowned monarch; we see in Germany a sceptered emperor; we see in this country an uncrowned president, and we fail to see any essential difference between Germany, England or America.”

The Socialist Labor Party said that before the 20th century got started. We said it through the First World War, the Second World War and the Cold War. We said it when Europe was ruled by kings, when it was ruled by dictators, and when it was ruled by Mr. Fukuyama's “liberal democracy.” We said it at our meetings, in our literature and in our newspaper, *The People*.

The SLP survived the kings, the dictators, and even the Soviet pretenders.

And through it all, the SLP said there was a solution to all the wars, chaos and human misery that capitalism brings into the world, and will continue to bring as long as it survives.

The SLP said that the way to end the wars, the chaos and the misery was to replace capitalism with socialism, and it offered its program—the Socialist Industrial Union program—as the means to get rid of capitalism and get to socialism.

The SLP and what it has had to say have been ridiculed, overshadowed, knocked off the ballot, and its numbers have declined.

But it hasn't been knocked out—because it was right. History has proved it to be right. Capitalism has proved it to be right. The despots and the

tyrants—no matter what they called themselves—have proved that the SLP was right.

And that's why the SLP is determined to go on fighting—to build up its membership—to stimulate the working class into classconsciousness—and to organize their political and economic might to rid the world of class rule in all its disguises—in all its forms.

So, if you are a member of the SLP, be prepared for the work ahead.

If you are a friend of the SLP, join us in our work—better yet, join the SLP and help us improve our work.

If you are just learning about the SLP—read *The People*, read the literature, and help us bring it to the attention of more workers.

And if you are a former member of the SLP—think it over.

The SLP is a tough organization, a determined organization, a democratic organization.

We all need to pull together, in one direction, and if we all do that we will not fall into the new Dark Age that capitalism is leading us into.

Thank you.

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