Challenging Empire

Phyllis Bennis
Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2006. 286 pages.

The idea for this book emerged from what the author perceives to be the extraordinary post-cold war circumstances associated with the American extremists' push for empire. Its thesis is simple and straightforward: American unilateralism and militarism have spawned a global social movement against such eventualities, giving rise to a new kind of internationalism. The components of this internationalism are threefold: people and social movements, governments, and the United Nations (UN). Together, rather optimistically or perhaps wishfully, they have come to constitute a "second superpower" capable of challenging this imperial drive (pp. 6 and 257).

The book is divided into five chapters. The "Introduction" (chapter 1) presents the thesis and framework of the three-part internationalist perspective. Chapter 2 presents the global social movement as the core component that defies war and empire and that exhibits peoples' power as the foundation of such defiance. The main argument here is that the events of September 11, 2001, provided a golden opportunity for the George W. Bush administration to manipulate and exploit the American people's fears and shock. Fear, according to Bennis, undermines "not only independence of will, but the very capacity to think" (p. 31). This was the means by which the neo-conservatives, hijacking state power, were able to carry the American people along, allowing for no serious questioning or opposition. Yet if the United States is

the "great democracy" it "brags" to be, Bennis argues, a greater responsibility is put on American peace movements and American citizens who are "liable for [the] US government's actions" (p. 108).

Chapter 3 moves to the role of all governments in opposing the American drive for world domination. This chapter emphasizes the immense burden shared by the rest of the world to come together, not just as governments but also in alliance with their people, even if this may frequently be "tactical," "hesitant," and opportunistically linked to "narrowly defined self-interests" (p. 111). After all, it was American unilateralism that allowed the United States to launch a destructive war against Iraq in March 2003 and allowed it to sideline the UN in favor of a so-called "coalition of the willing" cobbled up outside the Security Council through intimidation, bribes, and threats (p. 151). "Overbearing" power, according to Bennis, does not allow for a "spirit of moderation," and the United States is unlikely to show any (p. 111). This continues to force an uncomfortable situation on many countries and governments. An alliance, therefore, must occur even in the face of tremendous American counter-pressure and "inadmissible" hegemonic tendencies (p. 113).

Chapter 4 deals with the third component: the UN. Bennis charges that this body is the least capable of playing any consistent role in challenging the American drive for global hegemony. Left to its own devices, the UN becomes nothing more than "a tool of American foreign policy," as former American ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright put it in 1995 (pp. 191 and 197). Isolated from the other two components, the UN will continue to simply reflect – rather than challenge – existing global power disparities. Nevertheless, Bennis declares that internationalism requires a forceful and courageous defense of the UN (p. 192), for whatever its weaknesses, its charter and resolutions do mean and stand for something related to the organization's original purpose of saving the world from the "scourge of war" (p. 223). The UN, therefore, has to be reformed not by "downsizing," but by being democratized and made transparent, away from the veto-wielding powers of the Security Council. Reform, in the author's view, means giving voice to the disenfranchised global South and defending the weakest and poorest nations from exploitation by multinational institutions. It also includes shifting crucial issues out of the American-controlled Security Council to the more democratic and "veto-less" General Assembly.

Finally, chapter 5 raises two important questions facing global social and popular movements: how to put enough pressure on governments to

force them to stand up to the United States' hegemonic drive, and how to bring enough governments together to pull the UN out from under its current domination by the United States (p. 242). Bennis emphasizes that despite the inherent contradictions that render any alliances between social movements, governments, and the UN of short duration, the intersection of interests still remains a key weapon for global resistance (p. 242).

This book falls within the genre of visionary works. However, one occasionally gets the feeling of a strong sense of advocacy that tends to underestimate possibilities and prospects. The author's fervent call for reforming the UN does not explain how that goal could be accomplished, given that the veto-wielding powers will naturally oppose any changes that may undermine their power and influence. In fact, the UN's very structure seems to hinder such a process. Furthermore, what hope is there in governments that, as she indicates, would cast their votes in the Arab League against providing any military assistance to aid the war against Iraq, only to open their land, sea, and airspace to invading American forces? (p. 165). And, how far can social groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society really go in the face of the pressure and infiltration by agents of the powers that be?

It may still be too early to agree with Bennis in heralding the rise of a "second superpower." Nevertheless, this book is a laudable attempt at contributing to the emergence of a unified global front against the American drive for empire. It is a passionate yet analytical call that should be heeded by all those who are concerned with and opposed to global injustice and imperial domination.

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