

The Real Death of the West | Prof. David Gibbs

Historian David Gibbs argues that today's international disorder grew from decisions made after the Cold War, when Western policymakers sought to preserve military dominance despite the disappearance of the Soviet threat. Kyoto University Symposium 2026: "Geopolitics in the Time of Monsters" Presentation 2: Prof. David Gibbs Drawing on declassified documents and Gibbs' research, he examines military spending, NATO, Yugoslavia and the politics of intervention. The audience discussion considers oil, capitalism, humanitarian arguments, China and public opposition to war. Recorded at the Kyoto Symposium 2026, this session includes the presentation and the full questions and answers. David's Links: University profile: <https://history.arizona.edu/person/david-gibbs> Research and publications: <https://dgibbs.arizona.edu/> Kyoto Symposium programme: <https://neutralitystudies.com/events/kyoto-symposium-2026> Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Support Neutrality Studies: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Neutrality Studies shop: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Time Stamps 00:00 Introduction: the search for new enemies 03:02 Military spending and the lost peace dividend 07:43 Support Neutrality Studies 08:39 The strategy of permanent dominance 14:44 Yugoslavia, NATO and European independence 24:46 Arms manufacturers, PNAC and NATO expansion 31:36 Q&A: oil, capitalism and intervention 46:17 Ideology, humanitarian claims and public resistance

#David Gibbs

Very good. Thank you for the introduction, Pascal. Thank you for inviting me. Well, I'm a historian, and I'm going to look at the issue of the world disorder we're facing today. I want to speak on the current state of historical world disorder from a historical perspective, based on declassified documents, which is my specialty, for a new book I'm writing right now. Well, we obviously have really the worst case of world disorder and danger certainly since the end of the Cold War. I would say it is as intense and dangerous as any part of the Cold War, including maybe even the Cuban Missile Crisis. And the question is, the key question is, how do we get there and why?

And I'm going to argue it was not accidental, but to some extent intentional, in a certain sense of the term. It was an intended effect that we should be where we are today. And it was thought up, indeed, and advocated. And again, the key decade, as I would see it, was the 1990s. That was the decade right after the Cold War, when we, you know, the United States and Europe, had no enemies or no serious security threats at all. And I would see it—that was a decade of searching for enemies. I do want to emphasize very strongly that there really was not just a sense of no enemies, but a sense of anxiety and fear among people.

You might say the foreign policy establishment, the ruling class, whatever you want to call them, elites, that this was a real threat to their way of life. It's often said, why do countries go to war? They go to war because their way of life is threatened. And the way of life of foreign policy elites in the United States was permanent war or permanent preparation for war. And they were very loath to lose that state of affairs and were eager to recreate it. And it is remarkable the extent to which they said this, not only privately in documents. And again, I follow Evarist Bartolo in being a big fan of private communications, but also even public communications.

And it really was remarkable that it was openly said that what we need is a new enemy. It was openly discussed. And I remember looking at—you know, there was, again, this was a source of anxiety. It was a source of humor as well. I remember this from memory. There was a magazine, a left-wing magazine, that had a cartoon that had the headline of the future. And the headline of the future was, "War to be declared tomorrow." And the sub-headline was, "Enemy to be selected soon." Right. All right. And that reflected an authentic attitude, a real attitude. Colin Powell, who was then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1990, in an interview, he said, "Think hard about it."

"I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains," which is a way of saying he regrets running out of demons. He's a general, after all. What is a general going to do for a living if there are no demons or villains? There were powerful vested interests standing behind these things, most notably that cluster of interests referred to by Eisenhower as the military-industrial complex. But it was much broader than that. It included think tanks, journalists, academics. People forget this, but academics in America today, as then, were very closely interconnected, especially political science. My degree is in political science, actually, not history. Closely interconnected with the military, especially with the Central Intelligence Agency—intimate connections with the Central Intelligence Agency.

And again, this was a source of great grants and conferences and fun places and so on for many academics. And it was openly discussed in 1990. There was an article in the Washington Post by a professor who studied Soviet intervention in the Third World, someone I knew, actually. It was entitled "Gorbachev Ruined My Career." That was the title. All right. Indeed. And it was a witty article, and it closed—I'm just going to paraphrase a bit. He said, basically, what we need in the Soviet Union is a hardline coup to bring the Cold War back, and my career would be on track and I'd get all these grants again. And he said, no, I know the objection. Some people would say, why should the Soviet people have to suffer just to advance my career?

And my answer is simple. The Soviet people are used to suffering, which I, in contrast, am not. Anyway, and so it gives you some sense of the flavor, the atmosphere of the situation. I mean, one more, just a personal anecdote. I teach in Southern Arizona at the University of Arizona. In 1990, I arrived in Arizona. I had not come from the western part of the United States. It's very much intertwined with the U.S. Air Force. And for the first time in my life, I saw military aircraft all day flying in the sky. And I wondered, what are they going to do with all that equipment now that the Cold War is over? Now there are no more enemies. And I suppose my answer was, surely they'll find another enemy.

And that's exactly how it happened. That's exactly how it happened. All right. I do want to emphasize also, really, the extraordinary extent to which we lost an opportunity here. The period immediately after the Cold War and during the ending of the Cold War, there was openly the possibility of nuclear disarmament. This was explicitly proposed by Mikhail Gorbachev: bilateral nuclear disarmament, complete and total nuclear disarmament by the two principal nuclear powers. The U.S. rejected it. But it was on the table as a possibility. It could have been done. It was not that this was a choice. And again, you know, we were discussing before how there are choices made by leaders. Choices do matter. I agree with that. And a choice was made not to disarm, not to disarm.

I should add, by the way, you know, the U.S. could have downsized its military to a pre-war, pre-World War II level. The United States could have become a normal country. There were no enemies, no justification for it. But there was a determination not to do that. We could have—the United States could have—I said, when I say "we," I'm an American citizen, so forgive the "we" here, the royal we, but it's a shorthand. But there was the possibility then of dealing with the issue of climate change, which was for the first time being recognized on a wide scale. There was a fascinating article in the New York Times that appeared, I believe, about two weeks after the end of the Berlin Wall, after the more or less official ending of the Cold War.

And it was on—it was a front-page article. I remember it. I have it in front of me here. And it was on the issue of how much it would cost to address the issue of climate change. And it said the costs would be colossal, so colossal it would be equivalent to the entire U.S. military budget. They didn't even address the issue of maybe the money should, now that the Cold War is over and the enemies are gone, end the military budget and funnel it all into climate change, and even address the issue, underscoring how sacrosanct military spending really was and the basic attitude related to that. Okay. Now the problem, again, there was a call for a peace dividend. Again, a downsizing of weapons spending to pre-World War II levels many felt was necessary, made sense.

The public, I should add, by the way, the American public has always been a constraint on U.S. foreign policy because there always has been some public reluctance to go along with foreign adventures. I think the public understands instinctively there is a trade-off between guns and butter. To the extent that you spend money on armaments, okay, you'll have less money to spend on social programs and living standards. By the way, military Keynesianism is often thought of as a generating force in economic growth. What's missed about that is it's a very inefficient one, because spending on military activities is a far less efficient way of creating jobs than government spending on civilian sectors like infrastructure. It's often left out. But in any case, the public, I think, has always been skeptical of these foreign adventures.

#David Gibbs

And during the Cold War, a prominent political scientist, Edward Tufte, commented that U.S. interventions at the time met—he was a public opinion specialist—with what he called uninformed

skepticism and informed hostility. My sense is that is generally how the public views foreign adventures. He was referring at the time to American intervention in Central America, but I think it applies much more broadly than that. And so the question was, how do you propitiate the public? And how do you bring the public on to the project of continued war? Well, in the first place, before I address that, let me note there was a determination not to have a generalized disarmament or anything close to it.

And it was distilled in a number of documents, but the most important one is a document that I've been fascinated by, the Defense Planning Guidance document of 1992, which was either written by or written under the supervision of Paul Wolfowitz, a very prominent neoconservative, then Deputy Secretary of Defense. And basically it said the United States was faced with a circumstance no other great power in history has been faced with, which is total global domination, basically. And the U.S. should seize the moment and perpetuate this domination as far into the future as possible, and that should be the guiding force of American foreign policy after the Cold War. And it was a remarkable sense.

There was a real sense of searching for enemies in this document. It talked about Russia and China. Russia, you know, the Soviet Union then, about to become the Russian Federation, was virtually on its knees economically. It was about to become a—it's not a vassal—something very close to a vassal of the United States. But nevertheless, it was looking forward to the possibility of Russia and China as enemy states in the future. And it even talked about, who knows, maybe we could go to war someday with Germany and Japan. It actually did say that, right? It talked about the European Union in hostile terms because this was a period when the European Union was considering an independent foreign policy, something I'll get to momentarily.

And at the time, it was leaked to The New York Times, I think, and people were astonished by the aggressive, bellicose wording in the document. I think very much reflective of the neoconservative mindset. Paul Wolfowitz, of course, was a very prominent neoconservative. But I think, in retrospect, this was really the foundational document of American policy after the Cold War. All right, this was really the guiding force intellectually. It's the historical equivalent to NSC 68. For those of you who know the history of the Cold War, it's the post-Cold War version of NSC 68. One more point, I guess, about the neoconservatives.

This reflected the full coming to power of the neoconservatives and the utter domination of the foreign policy process. What was, I think, the most essential way of looking at the neoconservatives—and again, I've based this on looking at their papers at Stanford University, their private papers—is, I would say, the Israelization of American foreign policy. They took the idea of Israel as providing a guide to how America should act: the hyper-military action of Israel, the tendency to downplay significantly negotiations, and the idea that military force basically solves all problems and we should use military force unapologetically and as often as necessary.

It's often talked about, the Israel lobby being an influence in American foreign policy. Obviously it is. There's no doubt about that. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt were correct about that. But I think there's something deeper than that, which is the neoconservative movement represented the insertion of the Israeli idea into the U.S. foreign policy process, making it almost, in their view, in their minds, almost a clone of Israeli foreign policy. It was quite natural Israel would be our closest ally, given that state of affairs and that mindset that went along with it. Okay. Now, again, the problem was bringing the public along with this idea. And I think there was a determination.

The best way to do this is by launching a war because, after all, if you launch a war and you win a war—launching a war we can win. After all, we had Vietnam, and that didn't go so well. So the idea was launching a war America is sure to win. And in quick succession, we had three wars. All right. The first one was the U.S. invasion of Panama, which occurred less than a month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, officially to promote democracy in Panama. At least that was the public view. The second—this was the large one, of course—was the first Gulf War of 1990-91, Operation Desert Storm, where the United States expelled Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait. All right.

Largest deployment of American force since Vietnam. The third, and nobody thinks of this as a war, but it's appropriate to think of it precisely that way: the deployment of U.S. forces in a supposed peacekeeping mission in Somalia in 1992. All right. And I think that, you know, the question is, what was the motive here? All right. Let me say that I've changed my views on this. At the time of the first Gulf War, I took the view, as many did, it was a war for oil. I don't think oil had anything to do with it. I think it was an advertisement for U.S. hegemony and a way of winning a war that was easy to win. They made a determination they could win easily, and thus advertising the salience of U.S. power.

There's nothing like winning a war to bring the public on board with militarism. That was what was done, and it was done with great effectiveness. As to the motive, I think, again, the motive was best stated by, again, Colin Powell, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he said—and he was quoted in The Washington Post—this was with respect to the first of these wars, the invasion of Panama. He said, quote, "We have to put a shingle outside our door saying superpower lives here, no matter what the Soviets do, even if they evacuate from Eastern Europe." That was a very honest statement, and I think that clearly expresses the true motive of that intervention and that of the other two wars.

It was an advertisement for U.S. power. And the remarkable thing, actually, is the extent of U.S. intervention during the post-Cold War period, the frequency of intervention, documented interventions. We can't document covert actions that we don't know about, obviously, but those that are documentable, it was more frequent than during the Cold War, okay? And it reflected a certain anxiety about the need to show that the military budget was useful because we're using—you can't have these very expensive aircraft carriers, hundreds of overseas bases, fighter planes that are, you know, built for 100 million apiece without using them and showing they're useful.

And the way to do that is through direct military action. And these three, I think, helped set the standard. These three initial wars of the post-Cold War period set the new standard. I think, though, another key event was the breakup of Yugoslavia. Initially, I think that—this is something I've spent many years studying—and I think that what that war was really about was, again, advertising the salience of American hegemony, especially NATO. NATO was the jewel in the crown of the American overseas presence. Of all the hundreds of military bases, the most important of them were in Europe, all right?

And this was a source of interest not only at the military-industrial complex, but large numbers of American businesses liked the access this gave them to the European market. And the uniformed military liked the fact that, apparently, it was estimated 25% of the generals and admirals during the late Cold War had earned their stars in Europe. And so there was a determination not to lose NATO, even though there was no function for NATO. Its function was gone with the defeat of the Soviet Union, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. All right. And so there was the issue of how do you justify NATO? And a determination was made: Yugoslavia would be where NATO would be shown its value. All right. I should add that another thing I do have to mention here, and this ties into an issue we just discussed, which is the servility of Europe.

This is a new thing. It was not always so. In the 1990s, there was a remarkable degree of independence in Europe, far more than during the Cold War. I mean, during the Cold War, you did have signs of independence. Of course, Charles de Gaulle left NATO's integrated command, Olof Palme and so on. Willy Brandt demonstrated considerable independence. But during the post-Cold War period, there was a real determination to build up the EU as a collective foreign policy power in itself, not so much at the military level, but at the economic and diplomatic level. It was felt that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. would be indeed in a position to have all the stuff, forgive the phrase, almost like a global dictatorship, and that was unhealthy for the world. And Europe could act as a check on U.S. power.

All right. And that the purpose of the EU would be to act as that check. And there were European leaders who were openly talking about the need for Europe to basically—not a full break with the Americans, but independence from the Americans was the term they used. It was assumed NATO would just die eventually and Europe would take its place. The euro was initially launched, and openly launched, as a challenge to the hegemony of the U.S. dollar. European officials stated this openly. Not only that, but from Japan, there are elements in the Finance Ministry of Japan, they're openly calling European leaders and saying that, "We hope you Europeans make a success of the euro as a challenge to the Americans, because if you do so, we in Japan might want to do something like that for East Asia."

And this was not private, but public. And this was extremely alarming, as you might imagine, to the Americans. Now, one might ask why, there was no enemy, but it was a matter of American not only prestige, but also enormous amounts of vested interests in maintaining the American alliance system

left over from the Cold War, and they did not want to see it disintegrate, and certainly did not want to see challenges to U.S. power from Japan and Europe. And so the question was, how do you demonstrate this? Well, Europe saw the breakup of Yugoslavia, again, a very short version here, as an opportunity to demonstrate its credibility as an independent actor in foreign policy.

And in particular, they sent mediation teams to try and mediate, not the breakup of Yugoslavia, but specifically in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina, one of the constituent republics of Yugoslavia, separated in 1992 during the breakup, and immediately it was realized there was a danger of civil war among the three ethnic groups: the Serbs, the Croats, and the Muslims. And the Europeans, working with the United Nations, sent a negotiation team headed by José Cutileiro, who was a former diplomat from Portugal, who negotiated an agreement among the three groups devolving power into the regions. And that really, it was—almost everybody agreed to it in principle, and I emphasize in principle, at least in its early drafts. And the U.S. immediately began trying to torpedo the agreement.

And then throughout, and so a vicious war began, which lasted three years. And during that war, again, the Europeans kept sending peace negotiating teams, which multiple times almost settled the war. But the U.S. every time tried to torpedo it. You can read the memoirs on this of David Owen, who was the principal negotiator, a former foreign minister of Britain. Very pro-NATO, by the way. He was always known for being exceptionally pro-NATO. He was a member of sort of the right wing of the Labour Party that was pro-NATO, if those of you remember the '80s. And he nevertheless saw an opportunity here to stop the war and stop the killing.

And in his memoirs, he said the biggest danger to his efforts consistently was the Americans, who consistently kept torpedoing his efforts. And I think what was going on here was the Americans did not want Europe to get credit for settling what had become the most important conflict in Europe since World War II. Well, yes, since World War II, certainly the most violent conflict—correction, since the Greek Civil War of the '40s. People forget about that. But certainly since the Greek Civil War of the '40s, this was the most violent conflict in Europe. And this would be a way of demonstrating Europe as a power. That was Europe's purpose here. That's what they wanted to do. That's what the U.S. wanted to stop.

And they successfully did so. In the end, the war was settled with a covert operation to arm a series of ground forces led by the Croats, and a NATO bombing campaign, Operation Deliberate Force, for two weeks bombed Serb positions. And then after the Serbs were defeated militarily, the United States held a peace agreement in Dayton, Ohio, at an Air Force base to showcase U.S. power, even during the peace agreement. People were at the peace agreement. I read the memoirs of Carl Bildt, the former Swedish prime minister, who was there. He noted Europeans were invited to attend, but just to observe; they were not allowed to have any role whatsoever. And he said that, you know, they had a big dinner under the wing of a giant bomber plane.

All right. Just to showcase American military prowess. That seemed to be the purpose of this. And in the end, they did settle the conflict. But the Dayton agreements were remarkably similar, almost identical to some of the agreements that had been proposed by the Europeans. All right. The key element here was to ensure the war would not stop until the Americans said it stopped. All right. The Europeans would not get credit. And above all, NATO would get credit for a bombing campaign. This was the first time NATO was used in combat in an organized way in its history. And so it was a great way of advertising the salience of NATO. Many people had no idea what NATO was for.

All right. Nothing like military victory to justify an institution like NATO. Then came the war in Kosovo, and Europe once again made an effort. There was a civil war in Kosovo, a very complicated civil war between the Albanian majority and the Serb minority, then ruled by the Republic of Serbia. And the Europeans again tried to settle the conflict, which was then at a very low level. It was a very low-level conflict initially. I think the total number of deaths, civilian and military on both sides, was only 2,000. They brought both sides to Rambouillet Castle outside of Paris and attempted to— and they were on the verge of an agreement. I mean, it was very close to a final agreement. And then the Americans came in and torpedoed it once again. The Americans came in and torpedoed it.

The circumstances of the torpedoing I will have to leave out because it's just too complicated. But the Americans clearly torpedoed it once again. And the idea here was to ensure that there would be no European solution to this problem. Europe would be held as incompetent. They can never do anything without America's help. That was the message projected. And it, of course, ended with a 78-day bombing campaign by NATO. And then the Serbs signed an agreement remarkably similar to the ones the Europeans had proposed at Rambouillet. All right. And again, the purpose of this was to ensure Europe did not get the credit that NATO did. I think really this was the end of European independence. My sense, the big conundrum is how did Europe become so servile to the United States? Unbelievably servile. Embarrassingly servile, I'll have to say.

And the question, I think the answer is it was their failures in Yugoslavia. And I think many Europeans said, if we couldn't do it in Bosnia and Kosovo, maybe we should just give up on the European project of independence. And if you can't beat them, join them and just become vassal states to the United States and see what crumbs of influence the Americans might deign to give us, which is essentially what happened afterwards. I think there's more, even more than the war on terror, with what convinced Europe that they were done with the idea of a truly independent Europe. Remarkably, even France, which had a long tradition, a remarkable tradition of independence from the United States, gave up completely and eventually rejoined NATO's integrated military directorate. Okay.

And so, nevertheless, there was a dissatisfaction among the U.S. military-industrial complex that military spending hadn't really gone up. It had been frozen at something very close to its Cold War level. But they'd been used to the idea that as the economy grows, as GDP grows, military spending would grow. And military spending didn't grow. It remained flat. And it was compensated for

inflation, but in real terms, it was flat. And there was a real dissatisfaction with this in the military-industrial complex, and so two new lobby groups were created. One lobby group was called the Project for the New American Century, which had grand proposals for massive increases in U.S. military spending and to rely on the latest advances in microelectronics and robotics to produce what they called a revolution in military affairs. All right.

And also an expansion of the American role globally, not only maintaining American bases, but expanding them into areas, especially in the Persian Gulf, where they had been traditionally weak. And the U.S., for a variety of reasons, didn't have a lot of bases inside the Persian Gulf at that time. And they called for new U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf. And they acknowledged that the public might be a problem here because the public is not on board. And they talked about what they called a Pearl Harbor moment. What we need is a Pearl Harbor moment, something so shocking it would bring the public on board. By the way, the Pearl Harbor moment is a neoconservative idea.

I kept seeing privately in the archives in the 1970s that in order to raise military spending, you need a Pearl Harbor moment, some contrived event. Well, personally, I don't think Pearl Harbor was contrived, but it certainly was a shocking event that brought the American public into World War II. There's no doubt about that. And we need some event like Pearl Harbor. Needless to say—well, I'll get to that in a moment. Another lobby group was the Committee to Expand NATO. Both of these, by the way, were heavily funded by military arms manufacturers. And the Committee to Expand NATO lobbied for NATO expansion. The U.S. had agreed with the Soviet Union, as everyone probably here knows, not to expand NATO not one inch to the east.

But I think the attitude in the Clinton White House, as revealed by William Perry, the former Secretary of Defense, was that Russia is a third-rate power. Who cares what they think? Or, putting it maybe more crudely, they're a bunch of losers, the Russians, and we don't have to honor agreements with losers. I think that was very much the attitude in the Clinton White House. And so, under this pressure of lobbying, the Clinton White House agreed to expand NATO first to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, and then more broadly over most of the former communist states of Eastern Europe, including, of course, the Baltic states later on in 2003. There were waves, of course, of NATO expansion.

The first was '99, and that was the product of the Committee to Expand NATO to a significant degree. Needless to say, of course, the Pearl Harbor moment was provided by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Now, I don't think that the George Bush White House had anything to do with the attacks. I think they got lucky. But sometimes you get lucky in life, and there's no doubt they used that as cynically as they could as a justification for massive increases in military spending and the implementation of the Project for the New American Century plan.

Many people, including Wolfowitz, who were involved in drafting the reports for the Project for the New American Century, were placed in the Defense Department. And so it's no accident that there

was an implementation of the plan laid out by the Project for the New American Century in advance. But I think the war on terror wasn't enough either, because it was insufficient, because even though it did justify military spending, it brought on the public. The problem was, we're talking here with regard to al-Qaeda about a ragtag group, very small in size, of people with light weapons. Indeed, the hijackers on 9/11 had box cutters, as we all know. They did not have heavy weapons.

And America has all this heavy equipment designed to address major powers. Just another humorous note: I had a friend, another academic, living in San Diego. San Diego, for those of you who don't know, is the principal base for the American Pacific Fleet, the largest fleet in the world. And he joked that—I called him after 9/11 and chatted with him about it—and he said he wonders if the U.S. Pacific Fleet is going to now go out to sea to engage Al-Qaeda's aircraft carriers and sink its submarines. Okay, an ironic comment, obviously. Al-Qaeda doesn't have aircraft carriers and submarines. The problem is, what do you do with naval equipment designed for that sort of thing? Al-Qaeda wasn't good enough.

Okay. Al-Qaeda wasn't good enough. What was needed was something more. And I think that brought us to war with China and war with Russia. Because after all, you can use aircraft carriers and submarines and heavy equipment against those powers. They're credible opponents, all right? They're a full justification for the military budget, all right? And so I think that, you know, as I would see it, if one asks, how did we get where we are, the answer is people in positions of power wanted it that way, and they said so. And they said so publicly and said so privately. That is my main conclusion. The final question I will ask, since this is kind of a very depressing topic, and we are talking here about things like the possibility of nuclear war, is that a very real possibility, I might add.

The question is, is there a way out of this? And I do hold some hope for the public. It should be recalled that the public sometimes does put its foot down and say no. They did that during the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War, you know, the government has all sorts of ways of manufacturing consent, as it's been called. They control information. They control propaganda. They're willing to lie brazenly. They do it all the time. And in Vietnam, they did it too, and it worked up to a point, until about 1968, when the war was obviously going very badly and the public turned radically against the war and eventually drove an American exit from Vietnam, even though it was a U.S. humiliation and a U.S. defeat.

The public simply demanded that they would not put up with it anymore. And the government was forced by the public, all right, to withdraw from Vietnam. I'm hopeful that we are reaching that point here with regard to the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, not only in the United States, but also in Europe, I should say. The situation is different. A very clear difference, of course, is conscription. In America, we had conscription in Vietnam. Nominally, at least, two years for all males. There were lots of ways of getting out of it, but still, for many males, two years. And that was no doubt one of the reasons there was opposition to the war. We don't have that now.

But in the United States—not in the United States, at least in most countries in Europe—but what we do have is this: declining living standards. There is no doubt there is a significant decline in living standards in the U.S., and even more so in Europe, that is directly and obviously attributable to the wars that are going on. And the question is, how much longer will the public put up with austerity in the name of war? How much longer will they put up with what are obvious falsehoods being propagated by the foreign policy elites? My guess is the end of that project is nearing. At least I hope so. Thank you.

#Pascal

Thank you. Thank you very much, David. And with that, I will open the floor. And yes, then Michael Ricci in the background first, and then...

#Speaker 1

Hi, thanks. That was a really, really interesting talk. I'm glad that you mentioned Iraq and that you don't think the purpose of the Iraq War was the oil, that it was to extend American hegemony, because that's something that I've always thought too, that it was just the U.S. trying to tell the world, look what we can do. Even with wars that we lose, like Iraq or Vietnam, we will still just destroy your countries in the process of losing the war. And it's just a way of telling the world, get on board with us. Let us put our bases in your country, or else you will suffer the consequences. Now, there have been a lot of researchers who have put a lot of effort and research into saying that 9/11 was a false flag operation to justify the Iraq War. But I've always thought they didn't need a false flag to invade Iraq. I think they would have done it anyway. I'm just wondering if you agree with that. Do you think that Iraq would have happened even if 9/11 didn't happen?

#David Gibbs

I think they need a justification. You always need a justification for war. And again, the public has to be propitiated in a democracy. And the problem I have with the idea of a false flag, the idea that the Bush administration orchestrated it, is this: there was an attack on the Pentagon. A three-star general was killed. Two of the key figures who would have been involved at the highest level of the Bush administration were Paul Wolfowitz, who I mentioned, and Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense. They were both in the Pentagon that day. I doubt they would have been willing to commit suicide for the project. That seems unlikely to me.

So it seems improbable to me that this was any kind of a false flag or a setup situation. I think they got lucky. They did get lucky, though. I think that, you know, the war-for-oil issue, the problem with that is that you do not see any dramatic restructuring of the international political economy of oil that I could discern after this war, all right, or after the second—well, the second Gulf War. Even then, you didn't see it. And what I would have expected, and I expected at the time—you see, oil,

like many natural resources, had mostly been nationalized and been taken over by governments. The oil companies still did very well in marketing the oil and controlling the oil.

The profits didn't really suffer that much. But I think they pined for the days of the 1950s, where they could go around the world dictating the arrangements they had for extracting oil and owning the oil directly themselves, and wanted to, I think, reconstitute that. And so I assumed that would happen. It didn't happen. And when it didn't happen, I thought maybe this wasn't a war for oil after all. Maybe it was something else. I think that something else was an advertisement for U.S. hegemony. At least that's the best interpretation I can make. I'm open to other interpretations or other evidence. But based on the evidence I've seen, I don't think it was a war for oil, no.

#Speaker 1

So you think the war in Iraq would have happened if 9/11 didn't happen?

#David Gibbs

I think they needed a pretext. I don't think they could have done it without a pretext. They would have had to have some justification. Maybe they would have found some other justification.

#Speaker 2

I think the best case against 9/11 being a false flag is probably that it would require the Bush administration to have been extremely competent at something. But the point that I would like to raise: you mentioned a lot about how there is this multi-decade obsession with a Pearl Harbor moment. This is kind of, you know, the way to get people on board with a project that they otherwise wouldn't be, because there is this scare term used in American foreign policy constantly, which is called isolationism. This thing that arguably historically never actually existed and is mostly just an interpretation of a lot of public commentary in the interwar era.

And to me, what's really interesting is that the American public was very, very bellicose in the Spanish-American War and World War I in many ways. But the so-called isolationist moment really was a reaction to World War I and how they had been lied to, and how the worst crackdown on civil liberties that had ever happened, probably possibly even to this day, under the Wilson administration, going after Fighting Bob La Follette, the incarceration of Eugene Debs. And these things, you know, actually really soured people on the kind of the global crusade, the whatever. And when World War II happened and it came to the United States via Pearl Harbor, our mythology, at least it seems to me, has been that everyone united. Everyone was on board. You know, this is our grand crusade for democracy.

But when you actually look at the historical sources—and, you know, you're a history professor, so I'm sure what I want to hear from you is the documents you've come across about this—but I've

come across many sources that say the public was far less bellicose and far more grim about World War II than they were about World War I, having been kind of soured on this, like, massive, massive war. There was a lot of draft dodging, more than in the First World War. There was a lot of suspicion. The big theory at the time was that the British had engineered everything to get the U.S. involved. And so, like, what are the things you've come across to show kind of the—it's not that it's wrong per se—but the exaggerations of the kind of noble World War II narrative in American foreign policy history?

#David Gibbs

Well, I think that—I will say I do hold to the conventional view that World War II was the last good war, in a certain sense of the term. On the other hand, there's no doubt the public was very reluctant to get involved, and Roosevelt was clearly very eager to get involved. In my view, he got lucky at Pearl Harbor, and he got the pretext he needed to get involved in war. But there's no doubt Roosevelt did want to get involved in war. It does definitely demonstrate the U.S. public is not eager to get involved in war. I think they often have to be dragged into war, dragging and yelling and screaming, shall we say. And they need a pretext, and Pearl Harbor was an excellent pretext. I think it really was authentically not something that was orchestrated by the United States. I don't find that credible. Losing one specific fleet just seems to be an unlikely deliberate act, in my view. But yes, I think it was fortuitous in that it gave Roosevelt the pretext he needed.

#Speaker 3

Yeah. Thanks for absolutely wonderful talk. I mean, it's just so rich, and the analysis is so good. I just want to raise a few points in no particular order. So first of all, about NATO, you know, I mean, I like the story you told about the European assertion against the United States. All of that makes sense, although... You know, you said, you know, NATO didn't need to exist anymore after the end of the Cold War, but that seems to suggest that NATO was brought into existence because of the Cold War, which hadn't happened. But I think the real, you know, the real opposition to NATO is not the Warsaw Pact. The Warsaw Pact did not come into existence until many years later, after Germany joined NATO. The real counterpart is actually the United Nations, right?

The creation of the United Nations put the noses of all the imperialist powers out of joint. They didn't want to, you know, have to rub shoulders with the great unwashed of the world and so on. And NATO was the creation of an imperialist alliance against the UN, and therefore its continuation after the end of the Cold War is not a surprise, although I can understand that it would have emboldened the European countries to try to assert themselves and give themselves a more independent role. That's the first point. Secondly, the way out of all this, it is definitely regime change in the United States. But the issue, I don't think, will be necessarily even war.

I think the issue is that over the last nearly 50 years, I mean, basically since Reagan, if not a bit earlier, the United States has become—the U.S. government has become—essentially a servant of

big corporate power. And they are willing to do anything these people want, no matter that this may endanger both U.S. citizens of the U.S. as well as the rest of the world, including, you know, continue to proliferate weapons, refuse to engage in nuclear weapons reduction, allow the AI companies to do whatever the heck they like, and so on. So I think that this is the real key that I think perhaps should be the focus, because everything else is a byproduct of this devotion. And Trump's devotion to the same class is now costing him whatever little support he'd managed to gather. I love your point about oil and not these wars.

Everybody says Trump is after—he has some grand oil strategy, et cetera, energy strategy. No, this guy has no strategy. There's no point in looking for a method in his madness. It is madness, but it is not his personal madness. So I have no doubt that he's personally mad, but it is not his personal madness. It is the structural situation in which he finds himself, in which, in order to win elections, he has to promise ordinary people the earth. And then after winning elections, he must not give them anything. And so this is the contrast, because the capitalist class in the United States has now become so greedy. And I don't mean by that greedy—I mean it is structural. Again, it's not personal greed, but they'd rather amass the money to take jaunts into space than allow the slightest bit of welfarism to take place. Yeah.

And maybe one final point—again, several—but I think that the political economy of U.S. intervention and, as I would say, political economy and geopolitical economy of U.S. entry into both the World Wars needs to be taken into consideration. In both World Wars, the U.S. was brought out of recession by the wars because of the huge multiplying orders from Europe. And when, in the First World War, private corporations, private banks were no longer able to finance these exports, that's when the American government joined. So I think this aspect, if we forget that, then we are not taking into account the whole picture. And I've got a graph. Maybe I'll put it in my presentation. But if you look at the growth rate of the United States since about the middle of the 19th century onwards, there are two big peaks. I'll leave you to guess what they are.

#David Gibbs

All right. Well, you know, a couple of points here is that I, you know, you're quite right, focusing upon the issue of sort of business interests. It's long been an interest of mine. It's hard to get at, though. Well, a couple of points is that there was a study done by three economists in the Quarterly Journal of Economics, very quantitative in nature, that looked at the major CIA covert operations. I think the ones they looked at were Iran, Guatemala, Chile, and Congo. I was in contact, actually, with one of the authors because my dissertation was on the Congo. And they looked at the major corporations that were most affected and looked at stock exchange quotations for them.

And they did time series analysis and looked for intervention effects. And they found that in each of these, there was a massive increase that was statistically very significant in the value of these companies within 24 hours of the covert operation to overthrow the regime was approved, meaning that there was massive illegal trading in stock by the people making the decision. All right, which is,

by the way, a federal crime in the United States. But leave that aside. You might just say, if you want to be crude about it, you might say this old-fashioned corruption in the literal sense of the term. All right. But it's systematic, is what they said. It wasn't just one case. It was multiple cases, underscoring the fact.

You know, I'm not really a realist. I mean, I respect many realists, like people like John Mearsheimer, but I think they're mostly wrong that the focus is on national security. Whatever else they were thinking about in that room when they launched the operation, national security was not the only thing. Once they made the decision, they ran out and called their stockbroker and said, "Buy." That's what the data shows. All right. I guess on the issue of how to look at Donald Trump, stylistically, he's extremely unusual. All right. Let's just put it that way. All right. I think that's a fair statement. Substantively, I see him as more of a normal president. Every president since 1945 has had to have their own unique war.

The only exception was Gerald Ford, who was not in office long enough, I think. Every other president, including Carter, had their own war, their own personal private war, all right? And every president sees a need to do that because great presidents are ones who make and supposedly win wars. I think that's... So for Trump to go to war against Iran doesn't seem historically out of the ordinary at all. On your point about the purpose of NATO, the historical purpose of NATO, as I would see it during the Cold War, the most important feature of NATO was really control of Europe, in particular the Communist Party of Italy and the Communist Party of France and far-left elements within the Labour Party.

I think the best way to do that was to have American bases on their shore, on their ground. And that was the main—at least initially, that was the main focus of NATO, as I would see it, was defeating the Italian Communist Party and the French Communist Party, which were supposed to win the elections. By the way, something very similar happened in Japan as well, a little bit more complicated. So I think it was the Communist Party alliance with a sort of radical faction of the Socialist Party, but that's a nuance. So, I mean, I agree with your points there. Was there another question? I don't remember. That's enough? Okay. Okay.

#Speaker 4

Can I just add to what the others were saying? I thought that was an extraordinarily informative and very educational talk, Indy. Thank you, Indy. I have one very specific question. When American officials and commentators and people like this promote all these various policies, they do not promote them in this, well, almost cynical way. You know, we want to increase defense spending. We want to maintain NATO. We want to do all of these things. They come up with all sorts of things about expanding democracy, securing freedom, democracy promotion, all of this.

And there isn't a battle of very coherent ideology, but there is a kind of ideological framework behind all of this. And I think it's an ideological framework that the Europeans have bought into and has

helped cement this whole process, and has played a significant role in strengthening bloc discipline, which, by the way, going back to what you were saying about Europe in the 1990s asserting itself, I think that was and has always been an important consideration. But the question I want to just ask is this: Do they believe any of this? I mean, are they being just completely cynical when they talk in this way?

Or do they at the same time actually tell themselves and each other that, you know, all of this is indeed part of some greater, better, nobler cause? My wife is an academic, and she's very much a literature academic. And she constantly tells me that people can actually believe, can actually think in two ways at the same time. They can believe their own ideology and be very cynical and pragmatic and selfish and self-centered about what they do. But I was just interested to know what you think, having read all of these internal documents and things that they write, and having perhaps a better insight into their thinking than those of us who haven't read them have. Thank you.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, I guess in terms of the issue of some altruistic justifications, this really came into full flower, I would say, in Yugoslavia. That's really when you got the idea of humanitarian intervention as a widely used term. It became an industry in academia. There's all sorts of people, journals, et cetera, focusing on humanitarian intervention, completely buying that idea. If you use the word humanitarian intervention, you have humanitarian motives. It's completely accepted uncritically for the most part, rarely challenged. This, again, came out of Yugoslavia. The fact that it's—the undermining of peace negotiations—that was humanitarian because you don't negotiate with evil people.

You defeat them militarily. Negotiating with them shows moral compromise and lack of moral fiber. A truly moral person defeats them. That was the narrative you got in Yugoslavia. We can't negotiate with Milosevic. Even if it means tens of thousands more people have to die, we have to defeat him first. And then we can impose a solution after defeating him, which is essentially what was done. And you could say it's a very cruel strategy because it prolongs wars. It means you can't negotiate or prevent wars through negotiations. But that was the logic. And it was especially influential, decisively influential, on the political left, which is where I come from.

And the idea became the left is no longer—you know, people would say—we're no longer against intervention if it's humanitarian intervention, if it has a moral, self-righteous tone. The most extraordinary transformation was the Green Party of Germany, which started out as pacifist and became one of the most pro-war parties in Europe. And this was accomplished through the brainchild, you might say, of Joschka Fischer, who was foreign minister during the Kosovo War and argued with very self-righteous, moralistic rhetoric in favor of German participation in the war against the Serbs in 1999. That was a real turning point in Germany.

I think it was emblematic of a turning point in both the left all over Europe and the United States, where pretty much the American left, for the most part, is supportive of the war against the Russians. They're not critical of it. I've had many arguments with my friends over this, even on Iran. Iran, I think, is seen somewhat differently because the Israeli element is very critical of Israel for a variety of reasons, and I think rightly so. But I think even on Iran, there were discussions. The New Left Review had a sister publication called Sidecar, in which they talked about the wonderful efforts to overthrow the Iranian regime. Not one mention of the role of Mossad or MI6 or the CIA. Not one mention, suggesting they had nothing to do with it, which is false.

Underscoring that even in Iran, the opposition to this is lukewarm at best. Lukewarm at best. With regard to your second question, this really was a tremendously galvanizing force. It meant one of the major ideological opponents to interventionism during the Cold War, which was the political left of Europe and the United States, was simply taken out of the picture completely. And to the extent you had anti-war sentiment, it actually moved to the right, libertarian right and populist right. And, you know, people like, for example, Tucker Carlson, Antiwar.com, which I read every day and I've written for, you know, they're libertarian for the most part because there's simply a void here and the right is filling it. With regard to your second question, do people say this cynically or do they believe it?

The best I can make out of it is they start off using these phrases cynically, but then they repeat it so many times they believe it themselves. And that's where I think we're at with regards, let's say, European officials talking about the Russian threat. Initially, I think this was very cynical. But again, they repeat this enough, and there must be a Russian threat. As you see so many times, the Russians are going to attack at any moment now. Everything bad that happens in Europe and in America, the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, everything, is due to the Russians. If you say that enough, you'll believe it yourself. And I think that's exactly what's going on here. That's the best I can make of it. Yeah, I have a question.

#Speaker 5

Thank you very much for the presentation. It's really informative, and I learned a lot from it. And I'm really glad that you mentioned the importance of the war in Yugoslavia because that's actually—I'm from China—so that's actually also a very important moment defining China-U.S. relations because, as we know, the United States called it accidentally bombing the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia during this war, which the Chinese, until this day, we don't believe. We don't believe it's an accident thing. We tend to believe that there's a purpose behind it, or whatever that purpose is. And also two years after that, there was this air flight crash over the South China Sea by an American flight to basically get into the Chinese territory and crashed with another Chinese flight.

And from the Chinese perspective, we see those two events as closely linked to each other, showing that by the early 2000s, the United States already had these ideas like, hey, can we try to instigate

something with the Chinese? And the Chinese strategy during that time was like, basically, we swallowed the pain and we pretended that this thing never happened because we needed more time to prepare. And the Jiang Zemin administration decided to be very soft on those issues in order to prepare, as we are doing today. But the thing is that from the Chinese perspective, there's one particular concern we have about the peace movement in the United States because we noticed that the general public in the United States tend to be very supportive of the war when the war is against great powers.

Let's say you performed very well in World War II and World War I. And even in the Korean War, when the Chinese, let's say, pushed the American army from the Yalu River all the way to the 30th parallel, there was no such massive anti-war movement in the United States, even if the war was not going very well. The only case we see where the American public was very anti-war and really pushing the government to stop the war was Vietnam. And that's a case in which the United States invaded a very small country and failed. So it seems to us that you need two conditions to exist in order to instigate an anti-war movement in the United States. The first one is that they have to invade a small country. And second is that this invasion has to fail.

#David Gibbs

I'm sorry, what's the second point?

#Speaker 5

The second thing is this invasion has to fail. Militarily, you cannot defeat Vietnam, so you will have anti-war movement in the society. And that concerns the Chinese a lot because we're not a small country, so we're really afraid that if something goes on, like if we actually get into conflict, is there any possibility that there will be anti-war movement? And that's also the thing that the current protest against the U.S. invasion—U.S. support for Israeli genocide in Palestine—was very insightful for the Chinese. But it sort of falls into this formula as well.

Because it's like, United States plus Israel fighting against Palestine, which is a small population, and you fail because you are not able to destroy Gaza. And then people started to come out and say, oh, against this war. And same thing with Iran after the war. It's like, oh, you kill Khamenei, but you are not able to take out Iran. So there's more retrospective things going on. But about, let's say, Russia-Ukraine war, for example, there was not much of even retrospective thought on, oh, is there a possibility for negotiation and things like that? And that's the largest concern I think the Chinese have. And I would like to ask your opinion on this issue. Thank you.

#David Gibbs

Okay, with regard to the—I'll make two points. One is that, you know, Vietnam obviously is the major example of the public demanding an end to the war and having an impact. But there's another

one, which is Korea. Korea was obviously different because it took place during the height of the McCarthy period. There was, for what it's worth, a bit of context: the American left, properly defined, was at its high point in 1945. It really had great influence. And I think part of what was going on here was an excuse to crush the left, which they did thoroughly and totally. And so much so, people were very intimidated by what happened. I think about 10,000 people lost their jobs.

Okay. As a result, the best way to think of it, I think, this is a purge. It was a purge of American society at the mass level and at the elite level against those who were not on board with the idea of a Cold War and wanted to continue the alliance with the Soviet Union forged during World War II. All right. But even then, there was tremendous pressure to end the Korean War, which had become a stalemate by 1951. And President Truman reached, I think, the lowest level of popularity of any president of the 20th century. According to public opinion polls, he did not run for re-election, though he constitutionally could have.

And he was replaced by Eisenhower, who promptly brought an end to the fighting. It didn't really bring—there was no peace treaty, but there was an end to the fighting, a ceasefire. And I think that was largely because the public was demanding it. He was elected on the basis of a need to end the Korean War, and so he did. And so I think the public does have its way of asserting itself, even amidst the massive repression that took place during this period, even in that context. And I guess, you know, the key element here, as I would see it again, is living standards that the public tends to—well, the public tends to rally around the flag when the president goes to war.

Traditionally, at first, the public overwhelmingly supports him—or has never been a her. The public overwhelmingly supports the president because that's the patriotic thing to do. And then the support erodes as the war drags on and on. All right. What's very striking about the war in Iran is this is the first time since 1945, maybe in recorded history, certainly since 1945, that a president launched a war and at the outset did not have majority support. At the outset, the majority of the public did not support the war. That's never happened before. And the support has gone down, down, down as the war has gone more and more badly for the United States.

And so I think that's a very good sign. It indicates we may be at the end of the road with regard to the interventionist project. It may be very difficult in the future for the U.S. to provoke wars with other countries, whether it be a large country like China or smaller countries anywhere else, because the public simply may not stand for it anymore. And I think that the Iran war may have set a precedent that presidents will have to think twice about looking for the glory of a military victory, because it may not go very well at the very outset. Again, I regard that as a source of hope.

#Pascal

And we lack the time for proper questions, but Agogo and Everest, please make a short comment, and then we have a three-minute break.

#Speaker 6

Thanks, Navid. You started—maybe I didn't hear you quite correctly—but there's a statement like countries go to war because their way of life is threatened. I don't know whether that's what you said. That's what I said. Yeah. And does that rule out wars of predation, especially when we talk about countries like the U.S.? Let me just run through the others quickly, because I don't think it covers wars of predation.

#David Gibbs

Well, I think the way I would see it is that if you have a history of being used to wars of predation, right, you want to continue wars of predation. That's your way of life. Okay, all right?

#Speaker 6

Yeah.

#David Gibbs

Okay. That's what we had here.

#Speaker 6

Unless you say that.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, I'm not disputing wars of predation. Yeah, it's just a way of life. It was a way of life for American foreign policy, the ruling classes in the U.S. Yeah.

#Speaker 6

But then that's a plea on the idea of one's way of life being threatened. Yeah. Yeah. It's a performance. That's what I mean. Yeah. And then you talked about—I'm interested in your comments about how Europe became servile. And you traced this, spoke a lot about Yugoslavia. Do we forget 1944-45? Europe lost the war. They were built up by America, in a way. Then we had Bretton Woods. Didn't they become servile then? Then finally, all right. The question about whether there was 9/11, the false flag, I understand perfectly that it's difficult to reach a conclusive comment on that. But if we track the very history you presented, even in your own presentation, does it look very far-fetched that a country whose way of life is fighting will not? Can we really say no conclusively if this has become the way of life for about a century? Okay, I thank you.

#Pascal

And last comment.

#David Gibbs

The procedure, you prefer that I just have a hand and talk, and then I want to respond. That's fine. That's fine.

#Speaker 7

In early September 2021, there was an informal foreign affairs meeting in Slovenia. It was the day after the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan. The ministers were shocked because they hadn't even been informed that the withdrawal was going to take place, not consulted. They were not even informed. They found it from the media. Number two, I participated, I don't know why they invited me, in a very confidential NATO meeting in Istanbul, where a military sociologist presented the biggest problems that they face in Europe. Number one, demographic: that there aren't enough young people to recruit. Number two, that young people do not want to recruit for two reasons. One is that they don't respect their leaders who want to take them. So that is a crisis.

At the same meeting, it was said, "We need AI. We need to think now of a military doctrine where we can fight wars without people, because people are not going to support wars." So on one hand, I agree with you that this is a source of hope, that people do not want to participate. But what is now a new monster, which hasn't appeared before, and Elon Musk has been given the task of thinking for the military warfare in the next 10, 20 years, is... to what extent will AI replace people in war and make it easier for power elites to actually continue conducting wars, even though they have demographic decline and even though they have young people not wanting to join wars? The last two points. One is Libya. The invasion of Libya and the bombing of Libya could also have been averted.

There was an agreement between Gaddafi and the tribal leaders to transfer power. Romano Prodi personally told me that he passed on this information to Macron and to the other prime ministers. They wouldn't even want to hear about it. They said, "We have decided, and we will bomb Libya." Last point. One way of looking at NATO is, I agree with you, not just to contain the Soviet Union, if it needed containing, but actually to contain the peace movement in Europe, which was not confined to the left. Because even the Christian Democrats at that time, the Germans and the Italians, were actually saying, "No more war." And they were saying it seriously. But then NATO was brought in to control these movements and to make sure that they would penetrate the security apparatus of these countries to make Europe a vassal. And it also explains their dwarfism.

#Pascal

You're out. One minute.

#David Gibbs

I'm very interested in what you had to say about Libya because I did not know that about Romano Prodi's proposal. And I'd be very interested in quoting you on that, honestly, since you spoke to him directly, I assume, and you can speak authoritatively on that. I always suspected there was some kind of— invariably, when there's an intervention, there's an effort at peace, a negotiation, and it's torpedoed, and we intervene anyway. It's usually the U.S. that does the torpedoing. I assume it was this time too. And so that's very useful information. Let me see. I don't want to take up too much time here, so perhaps we can discuss it more, I guess, over lunch.

#Pascal

Yeah, that's exactly what we have to do. And with this, I would like to thank you, David Gibb.