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Imperial Crusades: The Corruption of U.S. Foreign Policy

by Alexander Cockburn

The following is a transcript of a speech given at The Future of Freedom Foundation's June 2008 conference, "Restoring the Republic: Foreign Policy & Civil Liberties" held in Reston, Virginia.

Jacob Hornberger: Alexander Cockburn is co-editor of *CounterPunch*, one of the hardest-hitting liberal websites on the Internet. It's one of the websites that I go to every single morning, especially their fantastic articles on foreign policy and civil liberties. Alexander is one of the country's best-known radical journalists, with a regular column for *The Nation* called "Beat the Devil." He was born in Scotland, he graduated from Oxford with a degree in English Literature and Language, and his articles have appeared in the *Village Voice*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, where he had a regular column from 1980 to 1990. He has authored and edited several books, including *Corruptions of Empire*, *Whiteout: The CIA, Drugs and the Press*, and *Imperial Crusades*. The title of Alexander's talk is "Imperial Crusades: The Corruption of U.S. Foreign Policy." Alexander Cockburn. <Applause>

Alexander Cockburn: Well, I'm delighted to be here, part of the Libertarian Outreach Program. This is not my first go-around as a kind of lefty token: Justin had me to a conference in San Mateo, I don't know, it must have been almost a decade ago. I got a lot of stick from the Left for concerting openly with Pat Buchanan. It so happened Buchanan had spoken the day before I spoke, but I guess the sort of sulfuric presence of Mr. Buchanan contaminated the purity of my left-wing vestments.

So what could I bring to this gathering that might be useful to you folks? Of course being here for a couple of days, enjoyed the speeches, what do I represent? In my days on the *Journal*, I was invited by the late Robert Bartley and Peter Kann to be the Left mad dog in 1980 through 1990. I think the idea was that I run on the op-ed every three weeks, they could say we represent all points of view. They were a bit more open to anti stuff than they are now. The current *Wall Street Journal*: I said when Rupert Murdoch took it over it was the only paper he had ever taken over where he was slightly to the Left of the editorial position. I think it's impossible to be more insane than Paul Gigot. You're gonna come up with someone, I know, but it's tough.

CounterPunch, interestingly enough, is about the same size as Antiwar.com. We have about 80 to 100 thousand unique viewers a day. As a guy who started his career of left-wing extremism handing leaflets to USAF truck drivers outside a nuclear base in Oxfordshire in the 1950s, where you'd hand up your leaflet, the guy would look at it and throw it back in your face or throw it over the edge of the truck, and you'd think it a good day if you got rid of 50 or 100 leaflets by the end of the day without being run over. Now, at the end of the month, the Internet being what it is, you can look and see where your audience figures were, and you can find that you were read by 30,000 people on U.S. military bases-- no truck driver throwing it down; they're sitting there looking at your website.

So, yeah, there has been a revolution, and I think people like Antiwar, the Libertarians, and *CounterPunch*, if we pass as some sort of representative of the Left, have probably done measurably well thereby. And of course, one of the reasons I think we do well, as opposed to the incredibly boring *Nation* magazine-- very swift, fast asleep in my opinion, although I've written for it for 25 years-- is that we do entertain other points of view. People always make a point of saying we are open to all points of view. The more they say it the less true it is. Most people are absolutely immune to other points of view than their own, absolutely totally immune, the Left if not more than any; the Left idea of a meeting is to form a circle, point the guns in the woods, and then fire.

I was a bit amused to hear Justin take a swipe at deviationism of the Left, and I have to say, then spend 25 minutes trashing your bitter opponent in the Libertarian movement. I thought, boy, he's becoming a Lefty. You know, Lenin-- probably not your favorite guy, very compulsive fellow-- when he was living in Zurich, his wife, Krupskaya, said, you know, Vladimir, you're just working all the time, you're working like a dog, and you really need to take the day off. And Lenin said, I don't know, I've got this to do, I've gotta write *What Is to Be Done?* I've gotta write a couple of manifestos and so on. She said, oh, forget it, let's go up in the mountains. So they went up a little mountain and they had the picnic box and they spread out the picnic box, and she noticed even as she was spreading out their delicacies, that he

was looking moodily into the middle distance, wasn't enjoying himself. And finally he turned around, he said, "Goddam those Mensheviks." That was Lenin, he could never get it off his mind.

Of course, the Mensheviks-- if you're interested in this thing, were ultimately-- their descendants, when they came to America, became the Neocons, so he was right to be worried. But he should have enjoyed the picnic. It should be inscribed on every movement, "Enjoy the picnic." So we at *CounterPunch*, but fairly early on, noticed that to our somewhat dismay, the Libertarian writers were pretty popular. You know, we had Paul Craig Roberts, who's our Libertarian man, and at the end of the month you rack up which are the most visited articles, and it's kind of Craig Roberts, Craig Roberts, Craig Roberts, Craig Roberts.

And then another guy called Mike Whitney: Mike Whitney lives up in the state of Washington and predicts the complete collapse of capitalism on a twice-weekly basis. I called him up, I said, "Mike, I'm gonna give you one a month, only one a month, for the collapse of capitalism. If you go over one a month you're gonna have one less the following month." He says, "But it's happening, it's happening." I said, "I know, it's been happening for a long time, just take your time." And what we decided, the points of common unity are pretty obvious, antiwar and pro civil liberties and pro freedom. People, oddly enough, react favorably when given good articles on this topic, and that is our measure.

But we have also noticed-- the other day Seymour Hersh, noted journalist, called up my brother, Andrew, who lives in Washington, angrily, and he said, "Why did you give that piece about the latest Bush?" He had a great article about three weeks ago saying that Bush had signed a secret finding, or it must be about two months ago now, expanding the secret war against Iran. You know, this is funding groups inside Iran, campaign of assassination, the campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, which met with disaster about a month ago. And Andrew got it completely right, and Seymour was wild because he'd obviously been writing the same article, and then the checker at the *New Yorker* had brought him the one in *CounterPunch* and said, "They published it already," which usually doesn't stop Seymour from claiming a scoop.

But what struck me-- and I looked it up for Andrew-- I said, you've had a million people read this article on our site, which is nice; obviously I have to tell him that. Well, the larger truth for us is that the mainstream press is dying. You can just look: it's dying in front of our eyes. All my life I've been hoping for this day, thinking hope against hope, I wish the *New York Times* would shrivel up and die. And you know, like the little boy who, when the earthquake occurs right when she says I hope the school is gonna fall down, right in front of our eyes they're losing ads day by day, their profit margins are going down, they're trying to convert to a Web presence. On the Web, you're as big as that screen in front of you; that's

it. And so we have been handed-- I don't want to fetishize the Web and go on and on excessively about what a really wonderful instrument it is, but it is a leveler, a great leveler.

And I think when you come to things like the Ron Paul campaign and the spread of useful information, it's a fantastic thing, and maybe you're a more optimistic crowd, being called Libertarians, than the Left. The Left is always inclined to look on the grim side of things-- the cup is always half empty until you point out, look, it's half full, it doesn't look so bad. And they say, oh, no, no, no, half empty. You say, look, suddenly, when I began doing press criticism for the *Village Voice* in the 1970s, if you wanted to find out about the Middle East, anything other than the line being peddled by the Jerusalem correspondent of the *New York Times*, you had to run along the road to Hotelling's out-of-town newspaper store on Times Square, which is a fun place-- it had every foreign newspaper on the planet. You then get some Middle Eastern newspaper or pamphlet, and then you'd rush back to the office, try and copy it, or try and get someone to-- faxes didn't really come in until 1972-- to read you what the French newspaper was saying.

It was that bad to get-- there was a heroic figure called Israel Shahak: some of you may be familiar with him, he lived in Jerusalem, he is a professor of inorganic chemistry at Hebrew University. He used to translate the Hebrew language press, which were the newspapers which really said what was going on. The *Jerusalem Post* didn't have a word of truth in it from start to finish; that was for English readers. If you wanted to find out what was actually happening in the territories, you had to read the Hebrew language press, which Israel would do. And he would translate it into English, put it on an old-fashioned Gestetner, the one that always made your fingers turn purple, run it off on the Gestetner, and mail it off to 50 people. Nowadays you can go online and there's the English-language Haaretz. There's probably 30 to 40 websites which will give you the truth of what's happening in Gaza, what's happening in Lebanon-- good stuff, quite apart from what we run or what Antiwar.com might run.

So in terms of information, in terms of accessibility, there's a fantastic difference, and everybody's reading it. You can go to crowds now and say, if you're talking to an ordinary group, "How many people here are online?" And every hand will go up, whether the person's 12 or 80. This is a big, big difference, and it's to our advantage. So that's point one, the good news there. Now, we're at a kind of a median point in this election year. In fact, for those of you who may have missed it, Hillary Clinton finally conceded this morning in the National Building Museum down the road. Turns out she's got a really big campaign debt, believe it or not. So there we are at the median point, so let's look a little back at what happened and where we're at.

From the Left point of view, I think the Left has been pretty insignificant. I hate to say it, but the antiwar movement-- the country is antiwar, there's absolutely no question about that-- the Left antiwar movement is ineffective and almost imperceptible. A few brave souls, you know, do good things, make demonstrations, but as a collective coercive force, not at all. When was there a moment of maximum purchase-- a moment of maximum purchase is when the Democrats had recovered the Congress and were clinging to pretty small majorities-- did they go then and say, we place you on notice? We place you on notice that unless you really move to stop voting the money for war, vote after vote, you're going to face the sanction at the poles.

Well, there were some sit-ins done by Medea Benjamin and her crowd, but that moment was lost. They wouldn't go when the Congressmen from Pennsylvania said pull out right now, they then didn't go with him. And when you looked at the left-wing sites, the Democratic civil organizing sites, there was no real clear line drawn in the sand. So that opportunity was squandered, so that when we come to the primary season, we had Kucinich wasting his time and everybody's time with a clearly doomed candidacy from day one, doomed. We kept saying, why are you doing this? Build up a presence on the Hill if you want to do something useful, kept at it; I think sheer vanity, myself.

And then now you have Ralph. I respect Ralph a lot for some things he's done, although I'm a big fan of the Corvair, a perfectly good car. I hope there's at least a few lonely members of the Corvair Club here; do I see any hands? I do, I see two hands! Good, good, good. I said to Ralph, I said, "Ralph, you were wrong about the Corvair." He said, "I've never been wrong about anything." He did. This was three weeks ago. I said that's the most terrible thing I've ever heard a human being say. Anyway, so where's Ralph? He was in Portland, Oregon, the other day; he had a crowd of 45 people, in Portland, Oregon, another waste of time.

And so we have Obama. Well, before that we had Ron Paul. It was inspiring to me. I regularly drive from Humboldt County, Northern California, otherwise known as the Emerald Triangle, north up to Olympia. Then early on, I went up into Seattle, and you saw Ron Paul signs, all the way up the road, only signs there by the way at that point; so you could see something was happening. And we at *CounterPunch* were on board for Paul; not all of our readers. I said Paul was fine with me, if he moved into the Oval Office tomorrow, it'd be great. There was a lot of shock. Mind you, I displayed a certain enthusiasm for Huckabee, too, which shook them up, but I liked his jobs program. You guys wouldn't like jobs programs, but I like building an extra lane on the I-95, that was kind of tough talk, I like that. I don't live in Florida, who cares, build five new lanes. But you felt, and now I think, simply he incarnated the spirit of mutiny, the basic spirit of mutiny. He was for every little guy when he stood out there in the debates and staked out the position which was clear and uncompromising, and it was terrific.

I differ slightly at the moment when Justin spent quite a lot of time slashing away at *Reason* and all that. I think some difficulties did surface-- I know that at *CounterPunch* we had some tough questions about positions on immigration, on gay people, and on black people, which were difficult, given some of those memos. And I think it could have been a little bit better dealt with. I think it did take a certain spark out of the Paul campaign. And I think if one's considering-- well, what's past is past. I think Paul fought a great fight, no question about it, and one of the main things was his absolutely obvious and visible integrity, which shines forth-- you know an honest guy when you see one; very rare.

I remember once seeing-- very rarely do you hear a politician say something that really shakes you up by its seemingly suicidal honesty. I remember Senator Harold Hughes of Iowa, some of you may remember him, he was a former truck driver who became a pretty good Senator from Iowa about 20 or 25 years ago, and at one point he was being touted as a possible, I think he was Democratic, contender for the nomination. And he was on CBS, and they said, well now, Senator, are you a candidate for the nomination? And he said, well now, look, when I tell you that if as President, they said to me that Soviet missiles were speeding towards our shore, let me tell you that I would not order a response; why compound a holocaust? That was suicidally honest; he simply wouldn't destroy the planet. If half the planet was going to be destroyed, why destroy the other half? And the Hughes candidacy did indeed die right there with one answer, suicidally honest answer-- the only morally possible answer, by the way.

So we're left now with, as so often in American elections, all originality, all eccentric positions, all real challenge to the ongoing business as usual, have been leached out, until more or less identical candidates stand before us, which is our version of a functioning democracy-- the elimination of difference. McCain, it seems to me, is tremendously vulnerable; he's clearly an unstable human being. His role as a war hero, after one hour in the air dropping high explosives on civilians mostly, is open; is that really a war hero? Of course Obama is already hailing him as a war hero. His conduct in North Vietnam is open to question. We ran some pretty savage stuff on our website, and other people have, too. And in general he's exhibited a frailty of judgment and knowledge which is, even by the abysmally low standards of the presidency, pretty deplorable, whether it's economics or with almost any other topic you can consider. Of course the press like him because he's a maverick. You know, all of that is sheer posturing. Time after time he'd stand up in the U.S. Senate and denounce earmarks, and then he'd sit down and vote for them. I think his temper might nail him; I think stuff will emerge which will be difficult for him to deal with.

And then we're left with Obama. I'm not a fan of Obama's, I have to tell you. I came to notice Obama, really, it was a couple of years ago, when I noticed he was traveling to support my least favorite Senator, Joe Lieberman, a complete whore for Israel and the aerospace industry, when Lieberman was

under possible challenge in Connecticut. And Obama went there specifically to a state Democratic dinner to boost Lieberman. Then I looked into Obama a bit, and not excessively, and didn't particularly care for what I saw. And I noticed something that I think is a feature of it, that the minute he feels any duress, any challenge from the Right, he spins on a dime and opts for a right-wing opening. It's rather Clintonesque. In some ways I see him as a kind of blend of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton in terms of political adroitness. He's a very skillful politician, no question, and that particular brand of sort of quasi-evangelical rhetoric, which Blair was good at, I find it really hard to listen to myself. Some people are real groupies for it, I don't know, obviously they are-- he's the nominee of the Democratic Party.

I came across when he-- Durbin, the senior Senator from Illinois, had been impolitic at one point, to quote the FBI-reported conditions in Guantanamo, and he'd said, you know, if we read this stuff about people chained to the floor and people being urinated on and this, that, and the other thing, if we'd read this about Nazi Germany or the darkest hell holes of the Gulag, we'd have been completely horrified; but yet this is an American institution. It's a good statement. Of course the right-wing radio nutballs went after him, and finally he was pushed into making an apology in the U.S. Senate, and Obama made this speech. Well, he should have said, you know, Durbin spoke an uncomfortable truth-- that would have been the courageous and proper thing to say. Instead of which Obama laid into-- so to speak-- he said, my fellow Senator has made a mistake. He said the word "mistake" three times. And I thought, what a deplorable piece of putting his finger up to the wind. He's got by on really less, in terms of substantive commitments to anything, than any candidate I can virtually remember. Even Jimmy Carter promised something that was totally fictional, but it sounded concrete, which was zero-based budgeting; does anyone remember that? Obama just promises change, which as someone said yesterday, is a completely meaningless word unless it's got some substance, a little bit of traction in terms of detail.

Now, what happens with a Democratic candidate is normally they supposedly run Left in the primaries, then they get to the midway mark, and then they swerve Right and run as fast as they can for what's called the center, which is defined of course by a tightly knit gang of fanatics at the heart of the media industry. He never really did run Left-- that bit we missed out on-- which shows the impotence of the Left, really. You had the Edwards candidacy, which was the populist one, which kind of spluttered to a halt. You had the Hillary candidacy, which was all over the map-- you know, bombing, war one day, an indistinct populist message the next-- and you finally had Obama.

Now, the only moment I thought that there might be a glimmer of sense in the man is when he said in a discussion that every candidate for the presidency had to basically say I am prepared to destroy the planet. This is reckoned to be a true credential of the capacity to lead: press button A, planet destroyed, mission accomplished. And Obama backed off in one area, I thought maybe there is some

originality in the man after all; he said that he would not drop nuclear bombs on the Hindu Kush. This is a step forward. He would, of course, bomb Moscow, Iran, Beijing, you name it, but if they said, if Osama's minions are swarming around the highest peaks of the Himalayas, Obama said he would not immediately have recourse to nuclear weapons. This, to me, showed a sort of keen appreciation of reality. But I think he's abandoned it along with whatever else.

And now, of course, he's defining himself as completely safe; every candidate has to render themselves safe to the big interest groups. Wall Street: here we are in this huge subprime meltdown, which will be followed by the next meltdown and the meltdown after that as the whole rickety paper wigwams of bogus credit stretching to the heavens all gradually disintegrate. They've dropped interest rates as low as they can, the price of oil is sitting at \$140.00 a barrel, it's a mess, it's a terrible mess. All the biggest names in Wall Street stand in danger. You would think, looking at the campaign, that we were in some minor flutter of the market, not that the entire capitalist economy of the United States is listing dangerously. Now some say let it list; over into the road it goes, build a new coach and away we go. Others say, well, I don't know, let's try and get it back on an even keel for a couple of minutes-- all move to the other side of the coach. You listen to McCain and Obama, you wouldn't think that anything's going on.

You look at Obama's contributions: the biggest names in Wall Street are completely happy with him, completely happy; they showered him with money. He has of course headed for two major lobbies and issued statements satisfactory to these lobbies. On the 23rd of May, he went to the Cuban-American Foundation in Miami. I don't know how many of you have actually read the speech, but it was an absolutely awful speech, really bad. I'll give you one paragraph. Of course, the Cuba stuff, I need hardly say, that he did not find much to hope for in Fidel Castro's Cuba. Now we turn to what he said about Colombia: "When I am president, we will continue the Andean counter-drug program and we will update it to meet evolving challenges. We will fully support Colombia's fight against the FARC. We will work with the government to end the reign of terror from right-wing paramilitaries." Well, needless to say, the right-wing power of the military is totally at the beck and call of the government, so there's a preposterous statement right there. We will support-- listen to this next line: We will support Colombia's right to strike terrorists who seek safe haven across its borders. What does that refer to? That is an explicit endorsement of Colombia's bombing raids, intended, successfully, by the way, to murder a FARC leader in his encampment in Ecuador, which aroused passionate fury in Latin America. Here is Obama saying good deal, make my day-- absolutely no distinction, no light between that and the Bush position.

So did the Obama speech offer some semblance of rationality in a policy towards Latin America? Absolutely not. And they set a time when the coercive powers of the Cuban-American Foundation are not what they were, Southern Florida has changed, the old Alpha-66 guys are either dead or sitting on the

front porch waving their stick, different generation. The Cuban component in Southern Florida had got a whole other bunch of people in there; it's a very different place. But Obama goes down there whoring after the Cuban-American Foundation vote-- disgusting.

And then last Wednesday, where does he go? He goes to AIPAC, where, I don't know, some of you may have read the speech. You could probably write it in advance-- not tough-- a Democratic candidate at AIPAC, oh, that's a tough assignment. "We will also..." I'll just give you a couple of words from it: "We will also use all elements of American power to pressure Iran. I will do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon." Then he departed from his text-- "everything in my power, in case they didn't hear it the first time, everything." And just in case, one more: "I mean everything." I guess that means, I don't know, two H-bombs, not one? Israel should get whatever it wants, he says-- that was indirect-- and an undivided Jerusalem should be its capital. So right then and there, what did Obama do? He hung a bought and paid for sign around his neck, completely removing, unnecessarily, any margin for maneuver, any margin at all. Not one word about one of the great crimes in the world today, which is the siege and starvation of the civilians at Gaza; not one, not one word about the hideous unending abuses of the human rights of Palestinians; not one word about the obstructionism lying in the path of any just and equitable peace. So that's what we got from Obama.

Now, many people think, and I think it's a characteristic I've noticed, and they say he had to say that, he had to say it. And they say, well, there's a secret Obama. Look, behind that front one there's another shadowy Obama who is the good one; if you half close your eyes you can just see it there. No one said, I think there's a good Ron Paul-- I mean, the guy is what you have, what you see is what you get; that's why people said, "He's my guy." Now, when you hit the big time do you have to trim a little bit? You have to do this, do that, maybe you have to do a bit. But in the end, you've got to more or less be on track with what you are; otherwise you're doomed. And of course every word that Obama has said has committed him more to the position which he is, he will answer.

He may have left the Illinois State Senate a former community organizer on the west side of Chicago, where obviously you're going to be a bit more radical. Now he's in the U.S. Senate, he's done the bidding of the credit card companies, he's done the business and signed on to some pretty bad bills, which take a lot of state court ability to sue corporations and put some in the federal system, where they'll be lost forever-- significant long-term decisions which will impact badly ordinary people and the power of private people to sue corporations; he's done that. But still people say-- they are a bit like, you know, Pascal. You know, Pascal was tormented by the thought, is there a God, isn't there a God? And he made this famous bet, which I reread the other day, where he more or less decided, you can't really say whether there's a God or isn't a God, but you might as well bet that there is, just on the odds.

And a lot of people on the Left think, well, he may be good, he may be bad, but I'll just put my money on him. Pascal wrote, "If I saw no signs of a divinity, I would fix myself in denial. If I saw everywhere the marks of a creator, I would repose peacefully in faith, but seeing too much to deny him, and too little to assure me, I am in a pitiful state." That's the Democrats. "And I would wish 100 times that if God sustains nature, it would reveal him without ambiguity." They always want something real and something you can hang your hat on; they don't get that, so they're in a state of denial. They have to realize in the end that if you're going to get any significant change, you can't at the last minute say, well, Obama's the better deal. You have to maintain some form of consistency.

So where are we at now, long term? I think what the polls, the campaign, showed, is that if you resolutely stick to some very simple basic issues, war and the need to oppose it, basic human rights-- I mean, I have a friend I buy old cars from occasionally-- when I met him 30 years ago in South Carolina, he was a sheriff's volunteer deputy. In his trailer he had Christian Broadcasting Network, a Bible, and a gun, the basic furniture of the junker. Here he is 25 years later, watches the television, it's got many channels on it, and he said, "If I see a state trooper driving behind me now, I turn off." He says, "I don't want to get thrown over the hood of my car and beat up." This is a redneck from South Carolina. People know the cops are out of control; every county you go to has stories.

My hometown is Eureka. They've blown away four people in the last three years; one of them was a homeless woman in her place. She'd been hollering out the window, and of course they have a SWAT team, every small town has a SWAT team now, very exciting, you know, lots of federal money and money from this and money from that, and they're all dressed up to the nines in their swatness. And of course they go swarming into the hotel, they go crushing up the stairs, they kick the door down. The woman's holding a cell phone-- oh, boy, did that look like a 44 Magnum-- and so they blew her away. It happens somewhere all the time: kick the door down, shoot the dog, and if the person moves, shoot them, too. Everybody's got a story like that.

So when you start talking, and the state, the federal state face a crisis, they put so many people away, and you all know the figures on percentiles of people put away in either jail or prison or on parole in the United States far exceeding anywhere else; they can't afford it anymore. You give someone-- a three-time loser in California for stealing a pizza-- you're committing to spend millions locking him up in Cochran Prison in the Valley. They can't afford it; they're in a crisis anyway. So I think the pendulum will start to swing, simply because they cannot afford to stuff any more people behind bars; they haven't got the room. If they had the room they'd just-- two-thirds of the population would probably disappear, or they'd take care of the north end of Nevada and just put a barbed wire fence around it.

So when you stick to basics like that, I think a basic Libertarian position on civil liberties and on war, and if you can get what used to be a broad Left constituency, groups out there, many of them do good specific stuff. There are real heroes, whether it be public defenders, whether it be organizers of one sort or another who are good, who can be recruited to the coalition. The environmentalists, I think, these days-- I used to know some good ones-- I think they're mostly insane now because they've been hooked on fear mostly, and I may be differing with some of you here on the global warming issue. I think this global warming, I don't think man's got anything to do with it; I think we're seeing one of the greatest cons in the history of the planet. It's like medieval indulgences. You could purchase a pardon from the Pope; you slaughter your family, commit every sin in the book, and then buy an indulgence.

Corporations do that now. They pollute, they destroy, they cheat, they lie, they gouge, and then they say, look, we're pumping CO₂ into the ground, and you see 1,000 frustrated bodies of environmentalists worshipping at their feet; it's the most disgusting sight you can imagine, because they're panicked, everything is fear.

In Germany-- I was at a place in London, a very good outfit called the Battle of Ideas-- someone here should start a Battle of Ideas, debates-- people love to hear a good battle, but not a phony battle like you hear on the Lehrer show. Most of our media-- I did a parody of McNeil-Lehrer, when it was the McNeil-Lehrer Show, many years ago in *Harper's Magazine*. I said, how would they treat cannibalism? They would say, the real battle here, Jim, tonight, is between those who favor free market consumption of human meat and those who prefer some form of regulation. Slavery, the same thing: should you have straight-up slavery, a chain around the neck like that, or should you have maybe just an ankle bracelet? That's the McNeil-Lehrer Show.

But if you had a real series of debates, not necessarily in a presidential year, called the Battle of Ideas, and move it around the country-- let every prisoner out, the battle of the idea-- people love to hear real argument if it's real and it doesn't end up with two lunatics screaming at each other, two fascist lunatics at that. They were talking about recycling, and this German guy just said, his thesis was, "Recycling Is a Waste of Time." I thought the guy was going to be dismembered. He described how in Germany now, when you've eaten dinner, I think it's 15 different waste paper receptacles await the detritus of your meal: one bin for the cardboard plate, one thing for the little foil thing around your bottle, one of the, I don't know, the excessively tough chicken leg, on and on and on. And then the crowd listening, they liked this, they said, the two environmentalist ladies were sitting there looking like two ladies under the guillotine in the French Revolution, their lips were really pursed like that. And a woman stood up and said, "I've stood there in _____ England, and I've seen how I put my green bottle in

here and my white bottle in there, and the other bottle in there, and sod me if the truck doesn't come along, they all go in the same one," she says.

I went out and I got in a taxi. The taxi driver said, "What have you been doing, Governor?" I said, "I've just been saying that global warming is all bullsh**," excuse me. He says, "I hear that." He said, "Ken Livingston has just mandated that we put in a new air cleaning outfit; it cost me 4,000 pounds." That's 8,000 dollars. Mandatory. They clip all this junk on. It's like the catalytic converter; you know what that does? It makes sulfuric acid, you can watch it dripping out the back of the car; might as well just tune up your car and be done. I speak as the owner of a 1962, I may be partial to it. So the left is paralyzed with fear. I think we have to evolve, and therefore the environmentalists, which were, I think, a very significant and important constituency, activist constituency, 10, 15 years ago, are gone, gone to the forces of unreason and madness.

So, if we can-- now, war, I used to say to Jeffrey, "You know, Justin's got the wrong title, Antiwar; you know, we're *CounterPunch*, there's always gonna be a need to *CounterPunch*, one day maybe there won't be a war and then they'll be in a problem." Wrong. There will be war as long as we're all alive. And I happen to think, looking at the situation and worrying about this presidential candidate, we should be thinking as though we were barbarians in the Roman Empire in about the fourth century. They weren't saying, I think Honorius will do a better job than Severus when it comes to the next emperor; they were waiting for the whole thing to go down the tubes, that we need to think moderately long term. We are in a period of long-term imperial disintegration, which could go on for a very, very long time, and it is our duty primarily, I believe, to state a real vision-- the people need visions-- a utopian vision.

People have to have a sense of what they should struggle for. It's no use just saying, "It's all awful." My dad, in the 1930s-- he was a reporter for the *London Times* in New York, and he'd go around and the Communist Party guy would be recruiting, and the Communists would be saying, "Comrades, as I speak to you all, many of our brothers and sisters are writhing in the torture chambers of the Imperialist policemen." My father said, you know, as an inducement to join, it kind of lacked allure; really, you don't want to join something in the definite promise you're gonna get tortured. There has to be more utopianism and there has to be straightforward more spirit of mutiny, which I think you Libertarians are good at offering. If the Left could offer a little bit of utopia, some of the utopia may differ, then I think we can continue to have an enjoyable, and hopefully creative, association. Thank you.

Man 1: Mr. Cockburn, thank you very much, that was very illuminating. From time to time you have reported on the Sami Al-Arian case; I think there have been some little blurbs in your *CounterPunch*.

What is your take, or are you familiar with what seems to be the perpetual incarceration of Sami Al-Arian?

Alexander Cockburn: Yeah, oddly enough, his daughter, Leila Al-Arian, was my intern at *The Nation*. For those of you who don't know, Sami Al-Arian was a professor in Southern Florida who got charged with condoning terrorism and all the rest of it, and was acquitted on I think 13 of 15 charges, and the two that remained open were very, very questionable. He has fallen victim to the vindictive persecution of an assistant DA in the state of Virginia. And this poor man is being dragged hither and yon, his health is very poor, he's always going on hunger strike, his weight goes down, every hunger strike is stressful and weakens his body further, and this persecution, I haven't followed the last few days, seems to be virtually unending. It's an absolutely deplorable and disgusting affair. And anyone who wants to, log on and just do a search on Al-Arian and you'll find the sequence.

Man 1: Would you care to comment on the Barr-Root Libertarian ticket for president?

Alexander Cockburn: I haven't studied this platform in the closest possible detail, I'm ashamed to admit. I think Barr's support-- as I saw it from being a pretty mean guy in that earlier congressional career-- I think his coming out for civil liberties and stuff is very good. And frankly, I'd support almost any ticket that's running against the major tickets, I mean, within reason; I don't want to hook myself with some really, you know, racist or whatever. But yeah, I support Ralph. I wish Ralph well; I just think he's stupid the way he has gone about it. So, therefore, I think anything that gets promoted as presenting a real alternative, a criticism of the two major candidates, is good.

Man 1: Alex, as one who considers himself a Left Libertarian, and I remind my fellow Libertarians here that Bastiat sat with Prudhomme on the Left side of the French Assembly, and also as one who has been proudly published on *CounterPunch's* site, what can we do not only to further this association that you mentioned at the end, but maybe even turn it into something of an alliance with the truly, genuinely anti-state elements of the Left?

Alexander Cockburn: Well, that's a good question, and *Inquiry* was one of the brightest lights of the-- I remember when I was first in New York and suddenly this magazine was there-- *Inquiry*-- which had a bunch of people normally regarded as on the Right, and then a bunch of people like Chomsky. And I was honored to be in it and so forth. And then we have the Fed to thank for this. I think there have to be a few meetings, maybe a Battle of Ideas. There are some big issues that potentially divide or have to be sorted through-- views of the role of-- I think any Leftist--

One of my earliest memories is of Wright Patman, who was chairman of the House Banking Committee, and in those days-- five minutes to go; I'll try and keep it short, because there are people there. Patman was a dirty hater of the Federal Reserve, and he used to say to the Chairman of the time, "Any reason why you shouldn't be in the penitentiary?" That was his first question. So they bounced Patman out of there. But I think a battle of the ideas, maybe one a year, would be a lot of fun. We should talk about it; I hope we do.

Man 1: Thank you for your eloquence and your wit. In a recent conversation with Sy Hersh, he and I were talking about covert and overt military privatization in a larger strategic context, collaboration with British and Blackwater and other things. But he was very fatalistic, and he said, "Robert, it's just all over the place." Now these are the Libertarians here. I'm not entirely in that tradition, but I've been involved in this thing, and what I know about what's going on in the longer light of British history and the East India Company, I see these new frugalities developing in privatization and combinations of sort of special operations forces, special technical operations in finance and merchant. I would be very grateful for your insight-- I don't know if you've written on this-- for you to comment on this phenomenon in a larger sense, of this outsourcing, this move to privatization and combinations; not just some of the origins with executive outcomes, <inaudible> but what's going on here and in China and Russia. Thank you.

Alexander Cockburn: Well, privatization, a lot of it is simply escaping any kind of urbicide. It was a little bit like the Contra arms shuffle of the 1980s, when you were outsourcing to these supposedly private planes, or, before that, in Vietnam, when they claimed that Air America was a private enterprise, which, in the ultimate sense it wasn't. And I think, of course, this will grow, A, for corrupt reasons, they'll pump money into it and you won't be able to account for the money. I mean, the greatest theft, thievery in the history of the world has been going on in Iraq. There's never really been any-- we've seen hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars disappear, hundreds of millions, either into the pockets of U.S. people who were attained as consultants or into local contractors, you name it-- one of the great orgies of thievery in the history of the planet. So, yeah, it's ongoing and will expand, I'm sure.

Q: As a younger person, I just want to thank you for bringing up some of the Obama as, you know, a war hawk guy, because I know you don't hear as much of that out there. But I'm curious about what you think in the future about the stuff with South America. I know, I think two or three weeks ago, I read Hugo Chavez, they discovered, was exchanging like hundreds of e-mails with FARC leaders. They begantying money to them because, of course, Colombia is trying to get in with us. I'm just curious how you think someone like Obama or McCain would deal with a guy like Chavez, who is going to probably be dealing with terrorist organizations like FARC.

Alexander Cockburn: <Inaudible>

Q: Oh, isn't that loud enough?

Alexander Cockburn: I got most of it but just the last couple—

Q: Just that a guy like Chavez, who is just another bad presence, he's going to be dealing with terrorists, I'm sure. Like I said, they just hide him too far, of course he's denying it, but I'm just curious if you see any flare-ups there and what a guy like Obama would do or what a guy like McCain would do?

Alexander Cockburn: With Chavez?

Q: Yeah.

Alexander Cockburn: That's it? Okay, I'll see you later. Yeah, no, I'll answer. I think Chavez, if he's always on his e-mail, they should pull him off the e-mail after an hour or two, but if he wants to write 100 e-mails to the FARC, he's perfectly entitled to. If Colombia, instigated by the U.S., is being pressed to attack him and to send people across his borders, which they've done, then he has every right to seek out means of defense with his neighbors there. Do I think-- I don't think Chavez-- I support Chavez, I think, in his presidency, and he is, after all, democratically elected, and he has obeyed the edicts thus far of the various referenda which he sought to expand his power. I think he's been a very good thing for Venezuela; he spread some of the money for a change, you know, one kleptocracy after another stretches the length and breadth of Latin America.

I think, no doubt, people are stealing in Venezuela, but I think they're stealing less, and more people who are decent poor people are getting the money, so I think Obama should stop posturing about Chavez. If he wants to really, someone should draw what the U.S. really needs to do, which is to stop, certainly, aligning itself with Colombia, which has a right-wing regime which is butchering labor organizers every day we speak. Every day we speak they're butchering, in the most hideous circumstances, people whom they regard as opponents. So when Obama speaks about endorsing Colombia, does that mean he's also endorsing the trade pact? I don't know. It's all a mystery. What the U.S. needs to do is precisely to, a U.S. leader, to abandon this rhetoric that he has any right to start dictating the future of people in other countries quite the way that he does. And one final sentence: In a way, I'll feel a little bit nostalgic for the Bush years in one sense. It's good in a way that the empire is run by a true incompetent; an efficiently run empire is not a pretty sight.