

Yes, There is an Imperialist Ruling Class

by [PAUL STREET](#)

Contemporary history is neither a series of random occurrences nor the predetermined plaything of a small cabal of super-empowered conspirators. The truth is somewhere in-between. **A sizeable cadre of class- and system-conscious deep-state and imperial planners from the heights of concentrated private and governmental power join together to shape the outlines of much of recent history.** Along with professional class “experts” agreeable to their basic aims, they do so in accord with their shared interests in the endless upward accumulation of wealth and power. They serve the profits system that is still headquartered primarily in the United States even as it develops ever more and varied outposts across a globalizing world.

They exercise vastly disproportionate influence on the course of events and policy largely behind the scenes, in the darkly deceptive name of democracy. **But it isn't about conspiracy.** The planners in question are numerous. **Their names, activities, and backgrounds and the record of their influence are all open to investigation by those with the time, skill, energy, and willingness to make the connections.**

It's about class power and the unelected and interrelated dictatorships of money, wealth, and empire that rule beneath and beyond the pretense of popular governance. (“We must make our choice,” the U.S. Supreme Court Justice **Louis Brandeis** wrote in 1941: “We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, but we cannot have both.”) It's about capitalism and its evil twin imperialism, with strong doses of racism, patriarchy, nationalism, police-statism, and eco-cide thrown in. It's about what Karl Marx called “the bourgeoisie's...need of a constantly expanding market ...over the whole surface of the globe.” “Capital,” the German left Marxist Rosa Luxemburg once observed, “needs the means of production and the labor power of the whole world for untrammelled accumulation.”

Nowhere is the planning and influence of the ruling class of the world's and history's most powerful capitalist state, the United States, more evident than in the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR). There are hundreds of institutions and organizations in which elite planning and networking occurs both at home and abroad. But, as the left historian Shoup shows in his indispensable new book [*Wall Street's Think Tank: The Council of Foreign Relations and the Empire of Neoliberal Geopolitics, 1976-2014*](#) (Monthly Review Press, 2015), no such group remotely approximates the CFR in scale, reach, and influence when it comes to articulating the national and global class interests of the U.S. capitalist elite and a growing transnational capitalist ruling class. With an individual membership of 5000 (boasting an average household worth of \$1.4 million), a top Fortune 500 corporate membership of 170, a staff over 330, a budget of \$60 million, and assets of \$490 million, the Council is “the largest and most powerful of all U.S. private think tanks that presume to discuss and decide the future of humanity in largely secret meetings behind closed doors in the upper-class neighborhoods of New York and Washington.

During the last four decades,” Shoup observes, “the CFR has not only successfully continued its central position as the most important private organization in the United States, one with no real peer in the country. It has succeeded in expanding its key role, and remains at the center of the small plutocracy that runs the United States and much of the world.”

Consistent with that description, CFR members have long played prominent roles in the U.S. executive branch. Some among the many examples (what follows is a small sample) include President Jimmy Carter’s secretary of treasury (Michael Blumenthal), national security adviser (Zbigniew Brzezinski), secretary of state (Cyrus Vance), and arms control director (Paul Warnke), vice president (Walter Mondale), secretary of defense (Harold Brown), and CIA director (Stansfield Turner); President Ronald Reagan’s secretaries of state (Alexander Haig and George Schultz), national security advisers (Colin Powell and Frank Carlucci), secretary of treasury (Donald Regan), secretaries of defense (Casper Weinberger and Frank Carlucci) and CIA directors (William Casey and William Weber); ten of CFR member George H.W. Bush’s eleven top foreign policymakers; fifteen of CFR member Bill Clinton’s top seventeen foreign policymakers along with two of three of Clinton’s treasury secretaries; fourteen of George W. Bush’s top foreign policy officials; twelve of Obama’s top foreign policy positions along with CFR members in five of his domestic policy cabinet positions.

The CFR possesses an unrivalled and vast domestic network of overlapping membership and directors with other leading “nonprofit” think-tanks and policy groups (Brookings, Carnegie, the Wilson Center, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Peterson Institute for International Economics, the RAND Corporation. and many more), other private policy groups (including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Council, and the Business Roundtable), leading lobbying firms, top Fortune 500 corporations, top private equity and other non-bank investment firms, the top for-profit strategic political risk and advisory corporations (including Kissinger Associates and the Albright-Stonebridge Group), leading universities (Harvard and Yale above all), major foundations (led especially by the Rockefeller Foundation), and top corporate media including numerous key connections with the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*.

The CFR’s Studies Program generated more than 180 books between 1987 and 2014 and just less than 1800 academic journal articles between 1993 and 2014. **The CFR’s regular monthly journal *Foreign Affairs* is the single most influential of all print media publications among government policymakers.** CFR Fellows regularly publish Opinion-Editorials and appear in broadcast media to advance the CFR’s neoliberal (see **note 1** below for Shoup’s useful definition of “neoliberalism”) and imperial agenda. The organization holds nearly a thousand meetings a year, mainly in New York and Washington but also in numerous other large cities across the U.S. And CFR leaders engage in countless informal consultations and briefings with U.S. and foreign government leaders at home and abroad.

Consistent with the emergence over the past four decades of a “small but increasingly integrated transnational capitalist class....in some respects a worldwide ruling class” (Shoup), the CFR has since the 1970s developed a large number of international networks with wealthy and powerful “superclass” individuals and groups around the world. Relevant institutions here include its British counterpart and sister

group The Royal Institute of International Affairs, the elite European Bilderberg Group, the heavily corporate-permeated Trilateral Commission (combining U.S., European, and Japanese elites who joined together to combat the “excess of democracy” in the early 1970s), the G30 (the Group of Thirty, a private gathering of top private and public financial authorities from across the U.S., Europe, and Asia), the CFR’s International Advisory Board (headed by super-wealthy capitalists from across the world), and a global CFR “Council of Councils” bringing together the top neoliberal think-tanks from the world’s richest 20 nations.

No societal stratum has been more prominently and influentially represented in the CFR than the top section of the U.S. capitalist class, Shoup shows. With one possible partial exception, **all of the organization’s top ten leaders over the last four and a half decades have come from the capitalist elite “and especially represent the financial sector known as Wall Street.”** Examples include CFR chairs David Rockefeller (heir to the greatest family fortune in history, head of Chase Manhattan Bank, and CFR chair from 1970 to 1985), Peter Peterson (the billionaire co-founder of the private equity Blackstone Group and CFR chair from 1985 to 2007), and current CFR chair Robert Rubin (former CEO of Goldman Sachs and Citigroup, Bill Clinton’s treasury secretary, adviser to top Obama administration economic policymakers, and CFR co-chair since 2007).

The capitalist, Wall Street-oriented nature of the CFR is something the body does not like to advertise about itself. One of its longtime Senior Fellows and top intellectuals, Michael Mandelbaum readily acknowledged ten years ago that “a relatively small foreign policy elite...sets the general course of [U.S.] foreign policy...with little or no input from the wider public.” But, Shoup notes, “what [Mandelbaum] refers to as an ‘elite’ is actually a capitalist ruling class led by his own organization, the CFR.”

“There are only a relatively few important domestic institutions not connected or [at least] minimally tied to the Council,” Shoup notes, “and those are generally on the far-right side of the political spectrum.” The most prominent example is “the Koch Brothers economic and political empire,” which does not share the CFR’s faith in “a powerful state” – one that provides the capitalist elite with “government protection, intervention, and largess.” The CFR has little interest in association with any institutions and actors “that are at least a little left of center, such as most of today’s labor movement...considered irrelevant by the Council.”

To be clear, the CFR’s ideal “powerful state” is capitalist-neoliberal and imperial. It is one in which what the left **sociologist Pierre Bourdieu** called “the right hand of the state” (the parts of government that work to redistribute wealth and power yet further upward, fight wars, and discipline the working and lower class majority) is far more potent and well-funded than “the left hand of the state”: the parts of government, won by past popular movements, that protect and advance the interests of workers, the poor, and the common good. The CFR’s recent and deceptively named “Renewing America Initiative” for “restoring U.S. global power at home” advocates federal debt reduction not through progressive taxation or cutting back the giant Pentagon budget (a massive subsidy to high-tech corporations that accounts for 54% of U.S. federal discretionary spending) but through major rollbacks of so-called entitlements like Social Security and Medicare (Shoup explains that both programs “are actually not gifts but the earned savings from the millions of workers, held in trust by the federal government”). It calls for tying immigration policy more directly to “the market needs of corporations,” for the rollback of public sector union membership and power, and

for increased domestic and eco-cidal oil and gas drilling (including hydraulic fracturing) and strip mining. All of this is contrary to majority public U.S. opinion.

In his influential 2013 book *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order*, CFR President Richard Haass (a director of a leading global investment management firm, Fortress Management) called for a significant extension of the U.S. retirement age. He looked forward to a time “when people [who] turn sixty...will still be ‘facing as many as ten to twenty years of work.’” Like most CFR officials and many of the organization’s members, Haass, a privatization advocate, doesn’t have to work another day in his life if he doesn’t want to.

It is all very consistent with the argument of CFR member and Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington’s argument in 1975 book *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. Acknowledging candidly that capitalism is opposed to popular governance, **Huntington argued that the U.S. was suffering from an “excess of democracy” and a “democratic distemper” resulting from disorderly citizen upsurges during the 1960s.** To calm this dangerous overindulgence of popular sovereignty, Huntington recommended, among other things, a weakening of government expenditures and regulations and an expansion of private “free market” capitalism’s role. As Shoup notes, “The bluntness of Huntington’s and direct advocacy of the neoliberal **[1]** gospel **violated a taboo among the powerful of U.S. society, namely that the rhetoric of the United States as a wonderful and exceptionally democratic society should never be openly challenged.**”

Who will save us from the calamitous relevance of the CFR? The CFR’s fingerprints, Shoup shows, are all over domestic U.S. and global history since the 1970s, Shoup shows. The drastic upward concentration of wealth and power that has taken place both within and beyond the U.S. (the top U.S. 1 % currently possesses more wealth than the nation’s bottom 90%) over the last four decades traces directly to the neoliberal – extreme capitalist (post-Keynesian, “post-Fordist,” and even “Millennial” capitalism in the language of top class- and system-conscious CFR intellectuals like Yale’s Walter Russell Mead **[2]**) – world view and policies that CFR directors and experts have powerfully and relentlessly advanced in accord with the organization’s corporate and financial essence over the last four decades. **The monumental, mass-murderous, and globally significant U.S. destruction of Iraq – the most important and disastrous U.S. foreign policy action since “the Vietnam war” (the U.S. war on Southeast Asia) – was carried out in accord with the CFR’s openly imperial and neoliberal calls for Washington to seize control of Iraq’s vast oil resources (understood by top CFR experts as a critical weapon of hegemonic geopolitical leverage in the world capitalist economic and military system) and turn Iraq into a “free market paradise.” [3]**

Undeterred by Washington’s criminal failures in Iraq, the CFR relentlessly pushes forward the imperial, US-led expansion of “the empire of neoliberal geopolitics.” It advances the expansion of NATO, investor rights “free trade” measures (the arch-corporatist-globalist Trans Pacific Partnership [TPP] and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership [TTIP]), a growing and dangerous military rivalry with China in the western Pacific, the drive to incorporate Ukraine and other former Soviet states into Western capitalism (helping stoke a potentially deadly conflict with Russia), the destruction of Syria, the protection of key imperial partner Israel, the terrorization and militarization of the vast darker-skinned “developing world” through the far-flung

deployment of jihad-fueling Special Operations Forces and drone strikes (among numerous other murderous and racist U.S.-imperial means), the spread of dispossession-inducing forms of genetically engineered agriculture, and the advocacy of destructive neoliberal social policies in the vast and deeply impoverished global South.

Meanwhile, the scourge of anthropogenic climate change emerges as the leading threat to human survival and a decent future with no serious acknowledgement or opposition from the CFR, consistent with its fierce neoliberal opposition to any serious restrictions on capital. As Shoup notes, “The facts of the global ecological crisis are ones that a capitalist-class organization like the CFR do not want to face: to save the planet and its existing life-forms, fossil-fuel mining and burning has to be severely restricted by government fiat. This conclusion goes against the entire neoliberal free-market monopoly finance capitalist world order that the CFR has sponsored.”

The at once capitalist and imperialist commitments of the CFR trump the basic material requirements of human and survival, making it an existential imperative for humanity to undertake a popular-democratic revolution to bring into being “nation states controlled by the people” instead of plutocracies run by capitalist “deep states” made up in the U.S. by the CFR and its many power elite partner groups. It’s popular, participatory and democratic eco-socialism or barbarism if we’re lucky – or extinction, it appears.

Endnotes

(1) By Shoup’s analysis the former dominant Western capitalist paradigm of Keynesianism has “been replaced” over the last four decades “by the doctrinal cluster of ideas called **‘neoliberalism,’** formally dedicated to the free movement of capital and goods worldwide (free markets) and multinational and transnational corporate globalization, promoted and enforced by state power. This is capital’s default position, the direction that the system always pushes toward, taking into account the level of class struggle from below. Besides being an economic prescription, **the corporate liberation project of neoliberalism also represents an ideological attack on the ideas of collective property (socialism), national development (national liberation), and social solidarity (trade unionism and community). Instead, individualism is exalted.**” In the “Keynesian scheme” and “system” that the Western capitalist elite briefly and contingently accepted to a significant degree in the middle third of the last century, “unions for workers were accepted with the ‘class compromise’; state-imposed regulations restrained some actions of capital; taxes on corporations and the wealthy were relatively high; state planning, industrial policy, and state ownership existed in many cases; and there was some attempt at achieving full employment and a level of social welfare of rank-and-file citizens through varied forms of social welfare.” Shoup, *Wall Street’s Think Tank*, 163-164.

(2) In his 2004 book *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America’s Grand Strategy in a World at Risk*, Mead, the CFR’s Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy “discusses the transition from what he calls the ‘Fordist’ era of capitalist development dominant from the 1910s to the 1970s to our current era of what he calls ‘Millennial Capitalism,’ almost entirely avoiding the more useful and accurate terms ‘Keynesianism’ and ‘neoliberalism.’ The term ‘Fordism,’ as used by Mead, is simply the policy of certain capitalists, one of the first being Henry Ford, to pay their mass production workers enough to purchase the goods they, the workers, produce. Mead does not mention the intense and costly class struggles that workers engaged in over many decades to achieve even some level of unionization and the resulting higher wages, better working conditions, and benefits in a given industry. He simply

presents it as a given that eventually some capitalists accepted unions, resulting in a more administered, regulated, and stable socioeconomic system, characterized by some state planning, a level of class compromise and less income equality...Mead points out that Fordism/Keynesianism 'has gradually been yielding to ...a new more vigorous form of capitalism' which is now being invented and explored...what he calls 'Millennial Capitalism.'" Shoup, *Wall Street's Think Tank*, 193. (Amongst themselves, ruling and professional class "elites" are not entirely averse to communicating in significantly class- and system-conscious ways about capitalism as they understand it.)

(3) For the CFR's neoliberal, war-mongering, and petro-imperialist geo-political thinking in support of the calamitous, arch-criminal, and mass-murderous occupation and destruction of Iraq, see the following essays cited and quoted by Shoup: CFR President Richard Haass, "What to Do With American Primacy," *Foreign Affairs* (Sept-Oct. 1999); Fouad Ajami, "The Sentry's Solitude," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2001); CFR Senior Fellow Kenneth Pollack, "Next Stop Baghdad?," *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2002); Sebastian Mallaby, "The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire," *Foreign Affairs* (March-April, 2002); Donald Rumsfeld, "Transforming the Military," *Foreign Affairs* (May-June 2002); Elliot Cohen, "A Tale of Two Secretaries," *Foreign Affairs* (May-June 2002); CFR Senior Fellow Michael Mandelbaum, "U.S. Most Plan Post-Hussein Iraq," *Newsday*, August 1, 2002; Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: A Council of Foreign Relations Book, Random House, 2002); Pollack, "Securing the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 2003, published under the heading "It's the Oil, Stupid"). **I recall reading the essays listed above before and after George W, Bush's invasion and being struck by how openly imperial and oil-focused (petro-imperial) the CFR's intra-elite discussion was** – all quite contrary to the official American Exceptionalist doctrine holding that the U.S. never behaves in imperial ways. (Empire, too, is not a taboo topic amongst leading power elite planners.) **Top CFR thinker Michael Mandelbaum (a leading Iraq invasion advocate), however, explains that "if America is a Goliath, it is a benign one": a benevolent empire that acts out of a noble and selfless desire to make the world, a better, safer, and more democratic place.** See Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the 21st Century* (2005). The millions of Iraqis killed, murdered, and displaced by compassionate Uncle Sam in this century (and in the last one) do not match the thesis – along with much else. --- *emphasis, m.z.* ---

Paul Street's latest book is [They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy](#) (Paradigm, 2014)

Appendix

http://monthlyreview.org/product/wall_streets_think_tank/
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Laurence H. SHOUP: **Wall Street's Think Tank: The Council on Foreign Relations and the Empire of Neoliberal Geopolitics, 1976-2014**; published Oct 1, 2015, Monthly Review Press, U.S., 27,95 Euro

The Council on Foreign Relations is the most influential foreign-policy think tank in the United States, claiming among its members a high percentage of government officials, media figures, and establishment elite. For decades it kept a low profile even while it shaped policy, advised presidents, and helped shore up U.S. hegemony following the Second World War. In 1977, Laurence H. Shoup and William Minter published the first in-depth study of the CFR, *Imperial Brain Trust*, an explosive work that traced the activities and influence of the CFR from its origins in the 1920s through the Cold War.

Now, Laurence H. Shoup returns with this long-awaited sequel, which brings the story up to date. Wall Street's Think Tank follows the CFR from the 1970s through the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union to the present. It explains how members responded to rapid changes in the world scene: globalization, the rise of China, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the launch of a "War on Terror," among other major developments. Shoup argues that the CFR now operates in an era of "Neoliberal Geopolitics," a worldwide paradigm that its members helped to establish and that reflects the interests of the U.S. ruling class, but is not without challengers. Wall Street's Think Tank is an essential guide to understanding the Council on Foreign Relations and the shadow it casts over recent history and current events.

Statements

Forty years ago, Laurence Shoup and William Minter published their book *Imperial Brain Trust*, a careful and highly informative analysis of World War II planning for the postwar world by the Council of Foreign Relations and the State Department, plans that were then implemented, establishing much of the framework of postwar history. In this new study, Shoup carries their inquiry forward with a very revealing account of how a small group of planners drawn from sectors of concentrated private and state power, closely linked, along with 'experts' whose commitments are congenial to their ends, have set the contours for much of recent history, not least the neoliberal assault that has had a generally destructive impact on populations while serving as an effective instrument of class war. A welcome and very valuable contribution.

— **Noam Chomsky**, Professor Emeritus, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This book will be a formidable resource for those looking for the 'American' fraction of the transnational capitalist class in an era when the hegemony of the U.S. state is being seriously challenged.

— **Leslie Sklair**, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics

Wall Street's Think Tank is an invaluable supplement to Laurence Shoup's earlier book, *Imperial Brain Trust*, as it chronicles the subsequent history and composition of the Council on Foreign Relations over the last five decades. It thus records how the CFR's early advocacy of the Vietnam War led to a reversal in 1968 of both Council and U.S. policy, followed by a restructuring of the CFR itself. Did this mean that the CFR avoided the widespread campaign before 2003 to press America into another disastrous war in Iraq? Not at all: The CFR, as Shoup documents, played a leading role in this largely dishonest effort. Underlying both campaigns Shoup shows the on-going presence in the CFR of the international oil majors, as well as of related financial interests, such as the Rockefellers and their spokesmen. Shoup persuasively demonstrates how U.S. foreign policies are still (as in the 1950s) formulated at the CFR before they are adopted in Washington. While it may be more challenged than before by other think tanks, none can begin to match its international outreach. This is a must read for those wishing to understand the dynamics of U.S. hegemony.

— **Peter Dale Scott**, Professor Emeritus of English, University of California, Berkeley; author, *The American Deep State*