

5. War is back and normalized

In the 15-plus years since 9/11, what was originally called the "Global War on Terror" has become a permanent war across the Greater Middle East and Africa (with collateral damage from Europe to the Philippines). In those years, staggering sums of money -- beyond what any other country or even collection of countries could imagine spending -- has poured into the U.S. military and the arms industry that undergirds it and monopolizes the global trade in weaponry.

... And the role [of the commander in chief] has expanded strikingly in these years, as the White House gained the power to make war in just about any fashion it chose without significant reference to Congress. The president now has his own air force of drone assassins to dispatch more or less anywhere on the planet to take out more or less anyone. At the same time, cocooned inside the U.S. military, an elite, secretive second military, the Special Operations forces, has been expanding its personnel, budget, and operations endlessly and its most secretive element, the Joint Special Operations Command, might even be thought of as the president's private army.¹

If the official purpose of the war in Vietnam was to stop 'the spread of Communism'—and not to establish and spread American dominance--then the expected outcome of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of state capitalism in China would be not only a 'peace dividend', but also a general relaxation of global tensions along with a reduced role for the military. But In 1991, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney publicly expressed his fear that nations such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, could acquire nuclear components after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At the same time, this collapse resulted in a mood of Western triumphalism and the fantasy that the US would dominate the world without serious opposition. The end of the Soviet Union facilitated the erasure of the defeat in Vietnam. The US had beaten the Communists after all. Neo-liberal privatization and deregulation incubated under the Reagan/Thatcher regimes burst into full bloom and meshed with the neoconservative goal to remake the world in the American image. An early articulation of the post-Cold war neocon view, was the Defense Planning Guidance, a document prepared in 1992 by Under Secretary for Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz:

Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.²

The events of 9/11 reinforced the sense of fear and victimization that the right has promoted since the Vietnam War and provided a palpable enemy for the US to mobilize against. They gave full flower to the imperial fantasies of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld (not to

¹ See

http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176226/tomgram%3A_engelhardt%2C_it_can_happen_here_%28in_fact%2C_it_did%21%29/#more

² McGowan, J. (2007). "Neoconservatism". *American Liberalism: An Interpretation for Our Time*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. pp. 124–33. ISBN 0-8078-3171-9.

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mention Wolfowitz) triumvirate. The actions of a stateless criminal conspiracy became an excuse for attacking the regimes of two nations, one of which any detached observer could tell had no relation to the crimes of 9/11. The US was to remake the Middle East initially by 'shock and awe', reviving Vietnam era dreams, and determinedly ignoring the lesson of defeat. W's announcement of an ill-defined global war (initially called a crusade) on terror in which "there is no neutral ground"³ amplified by his assertion of the US's right to preemptive or preventive armed action (or war)⁴ insured a future of perpetual war.

Where are we today? Estimates vary but there are at least 800 US military bases in over 70 countries and territories⁵ around the world (no other country comes close) at costs estimated from \$80 to \$200 billion. Besides the ongoing war in Afghanistan, the US is involved in some degree in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Less public is the fact that:

[In 2015] US Special Operations forces have already deployed to 135 nations, according to Ken McGraw, a spokesman for Special Operations Command (SOCOM). That's roughly 70 percent of the countries on the planet. Every day, in fact, America's most elite troops are carrying out missions in 80 to 90 nations, practicing night raids or sometimes conducting them for real, engaging in sniper training or sometimes actually gunning down enemies from afar. As part of a global engagement strategy of endless hush-hush operations conducted on every continent but Antarctica, they have now eclipsed the number and range of special ops missions undertaken at the height of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶

What US rulers have garnered from the Vietnam experience was not a sense of war's destructiveness or its futility, but how, in the words of Viet Thanh Nguyen to wage "forever war" more effectively. That they have been largely frustrated since the Vietnam War in this enterprise seems only to encourage them in their foolish pride. The shock of the Vietnam War to the American conscience has been displaced by a world in which peace is transient and war and the military is omnipresent.

³ "In this conflict, there is no neutral ground," USA Today, Oct. 8, 2001, p. 5.

⁴ *National Security Strategy* (NSS), issued 20 September 2002

⁵ <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/us-military-bases-around-the-world-119321>

⁶ <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176048/>