Manufacturing Insecurity: How Militarism Endangers America
Author(s): William Pfaff
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Manufacturing Insecurity

How Militarism Endangers America

William Pfaff

It is time to ask a fundamental question that few government officials or politicians in the United States seem willing to ask: Has it been a terrible error for the United States to have built an all-but-irreversible worldwide system of more than 1,000 military bases, stations, and outposts? This system was created to enhance U.S. national security, but what if it has actually done the opposite, provoking conflict and creating the very insecurity it was intended to prevent?

The most compelling arguments for opposing this system of global bases are political and practical. U.S. military bases have generated apprehension and hostility and fear of the United States, and they have facilitated futile, unnecessary, unprofitable, and self-defeating wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and now seem to be inviting enlarged U.S. interventions in Pakistan, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa. The 9/11 attacks, according to Osama bin Laden himself, were provoked by the "blasphemy" of the existence of U.S. military bases in the sacred territories of Saudi Arabia. The global base system, it seems, tends to produce and intensify the very insecurity that is cited to justify it.

AN ACCIDENTAL EMPIRE

The United States' present global military deployment does not seem to be the product of conscious design, nor was it assembled absent-mindedly. In part, it is the natural result of bureaucracy left unchecked. At the end of World War II, a precipitous dismantling of the U.S. wartime deployment was halted only by the outbreak of the Cold War. The United States' intervention in Vietnam brought some base expansion in Southeast Asia, but after its failure in Vietnam, the U.S. military was determined to have nothing further to do with insurgencies

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WILLIAM PFAFF wrote a syndicated column that appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* from 1978 to 2006 and contributed political "Reflections" to the *The New Yorker* from 1971 to 1992. His latest book, *The Irony of Manifest Destiny: The Tragedy of America's Foreign Policy*, was published in June.

and quickly returned to reorganization and retraining for what it still considered its primary mission: classical warfare in Europe in the event of a Soviet invasion. This eventually led to the brilliant blitzkrieg against Iraq in the first Gulf War, fought under the Powell Doctrine of popular support, overwhelming force, focused objectives, and rapid withdrawal.

Global deployment and its intellectual rationalization was a phenomenon of the military's restored confidence. During the Clinton years, the United States avoided foreign military interventions until the war in the former Yugoslavia forced another short, successful U.S.-NATO operation. The Pentagon took advantage of the opportunity to expand its role and seize unoccupied bureaucratic territory—as well as a major new base in Kosovo.

As Dana Priest writes in her book *The Mission*, global base expansion came about largely without press or public attention. The consistently well-financed military was available to the president when the underfunded diplomatic agencies and the CIA offered unimaginative or unsuitable responses in moments of seeming international emergency. The proffered military solutions were positive, prompt, and unilateral, and the armed forces were ready to execute orders without arguing. In so doing, they conveyed to both domestic and international audiences an image of American power and world leadership.

This logically led to a reinforcement of the military's role in U.S. foreign policy. U.S. Central Command, in Tampa, Florida, at the time led by the persuasive and ambitious general Anthony Zinni, was given military responsibility for troubles in the Middle East. From this beginning, a system of regional commands was developed for other parts of the world, with individual commanders, planning staffs, and operational capabilities. Thus, U.S. military proconsuls emerged—well-financed and independently powerful regional "commanders in chief" ("CINCs")—dealing directly with political as well as military authorities in their regions of responsibility. They soon became more influential than U.S. ambassadors and were treated by the regional governments as the authentic representatives of the United States. This resulted in a major shift in U.S. foreign policy operations. The State Department and diplomacy lost influence, and within the military system, the individual service chiefs found themselves reduced to the unglamorous functions of administration, training, and procurement, rather than their traditional troop-command role.

With the arrival of the George W. Bush administration, the U.S. military culture was challenged by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who was determined to rescue "civilian control of the military" from what he considered the bloated size and gargantuan inefficiency of the Pentagon bureaucracy. Moreover, he saw other internal enemies of his new regime: congressional and judicial checks on executive power; the State Department and the CIA, which he deemed weak; and the supposedly risk-averse Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, with technologically advanced special operations units, air power, and the support of the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, was a demonstration of what Rumsfeld imagined as the future

of warfare. Rumsfeld kept in his office a famous picture of a mounted U.S. Special Forces officer galloping alone across the Afghan plateau, presumably directing B-52 air attacks and his native auxiliaries to victory over the Taliban.

The postinvasion chaos in Iraq, which followed the successful "shock and awe" taking of Baghdad, left the country and its reconstruction entirely in the hands of the Defense Department. Eventually, General David Petraeus' version of classical counterinsurgency practice—rewritten and issued as doctrine by the army—together with subsidies to tribal groups to fight the insurgents and the troop "surge" in 2007, created the conditions for a national election in March 2010. A stable government has yet to emerge.

The Petraeus counterinsurgency program has now been attempted in Afghanistan, without notable success. Meant to progressively "clear and hold" territory under Taliban control, the international forces have been able to execute the first stage but unable to hold their conquered territory and prevent reinfiltration by the insurgents—and thereby halt a Taliban return to power.

The setbacks to Washington's counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan first became widely known to the American public in April of this year, when U.S. forces withdrew from the Korengal Valley in eastern Afghanistan. The abandonment of their main base and its five satellite outposts followed similar withdrawals for the same reasons in two other regions during 2007 and 2008. *The New York Times* played up the Korengal Valley story at the time, considering that U.S. forces had been there for five years and had lost 42 soldiers there.

When the Americans first arrived, in 2005, the valley and its people had little to do with the war. "Occasionally a Taliban or al Qaeda member" passed through, a Special Forces officer, Major James Fussell, said in a study of the affair, "but the people of the valley were by no means part of the insurgency." The U.S. presence immediately turned them into insurgents, not necessarily because they welcomed the Taliban but because they rejected foreign occupation. General Stanley McChrystal, who ordered the evacuation, told *The New York Times* on April 15 that holding these valley outposts did more to create insurgents than defeat them.

Like the U.S. presence in Korengal, the global U.S. base system was built to defend perceived U.S. interests abroad and to conduct global interventions (or indeed, if called on, to wage a world war). It is a system intended to deter war, but from the start, it has provided the means, the opportunity, and an incentive for U.S. military interventions in foreign countries.

THE MYTHICAL CLASH

In 1993, Samuel Huntington attracted international attention by writing in these pages that the "next world war" would be a clash not of states but of civilizations. The example he speculatively cited was a war between Western and Islamic civilizations for global domination. He forecast that the Arabs ("Islamic civilization," according to his terminology) would fight the United States ("Western civilization") because they believed the United States posed a fundamental threat to Islamic religion and society—despite the fact that the vast majority of Muslims

are Asians and Africans, not Arabs, with little reason to interest themselves in Arab quarrels. He also said that the Chinese ("Confucian" civilization) would be allies and supporters of the Arabs, furnishing them with arms and munitions.

His forecast proved wrong—as did U.S. President George W. Bush's similar argument in 2001 that hatred of Western liberties had inspired radical Islamists to attack the United States. In fact, the rise in radicalism and increased support for a return to sharia law, with its strict interpretation of the teachings of the Koran, were the product of a grave crisis within Islam. The objectives of the Islamist movement are to purify Islam and the practices of Muslims and remove Western influence—not to conquer the West.

The Islamic revival in modern Muslim societies is in many ways similar to political nationalism, but without a single national base. Although the Islamic world has always considered itself a spiritual community under religious leadership, when this community is threatened, it generates political resistance. The Islamic revival is also the result of a larger cultural crisis in Islam linked to its loss of the leading position in Mediterranean civilization that it occupied from the early Middle Ages until the Renaissance.

This loss was caused not by military defeat but rather by endogenous historical forces inside both the Islamic and the Western worlds—notably the separation of religious and political authority in the West (pope and emperor, each legitimate in his own realm) and the distinction made between theology and philosophy in the Christian, Aristotelian West. These two developments made possible secular rationalism and scientific thought following the Renaissance and during the Enlightenment, as well as the Western secular state. Orthodox Islam remained, and remains, in a wholly religious intellectual universe.

Al Qaeda is the product of a confluence of factors: the twentieth-century revival of fundamentalist Islamic thought, the failure of efforts by the Arab states to create a successful unified "Arab nation" during the interwar years in response to the Ottoman collapse in World War I, the postwar imperialist division of the eastern Mediterranean between the British Empire and France, and the controversial partition of Palestine and establishment of Israel.

U.S. policy after World War II made Saudi Arabia and Iran U.S. clients and took for granted that Islam was an outmoded way of life destined to be replaced by a version of the modernization that now exists in the West. This belief rests on the erroneous assumption that all civilizations are progressing toward a common end and that the United States and its allies are the most advanced in this process.

It presumes that because science and technology progress, cultures and political systems do so as well. But crude Rome rose at the expense of Greek high civilization, and both were preceded by the sophisticated cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia. It was the Bible that introduced the notion of history as a progressive process leading toward a redemptive conclusion that would give meaning to all that had preceded. This laid the groundwork for the form of secular millenarianism that developed during and after the Enlightenment. A similar view has reigned in U.S. foreign policy since the time of Woodrow Wilson.

The belief that the United States is destined to confer democracy on the world (a belief then U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice presented in this magazine two years ago) has, in part, been responsible for the extraordinary rise of military influence in the U.S. government and in the country's political culture. However, one cannot make an intelligent U.S. foreign policy based on the assumption that the United States' present power and place in international society are the natural culmination of human social and political development. The Greeks, who knew a thing or two about it, called this hubris.

THE NEW MILITARISM

The historian Andrew Bacevich argues that this hubris has been accompanied by the development of a new American militarism. During the Cold War, American political ideology became a sentimental and oversimplified imitation of the Marxism the United States was then fighting. It assumed that Washington's good intentions and democratic ideals were all but universally recognized outside the communist bloc, which was not true, as Americans were to find out in Vietnam.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, Americans "persuaded themselves that their best prospect for safety and salvation [lay] with the sword," Bacevich writes. Convinced that "the world they inhabit is today more dangerous than ever and that they must redouble those exertions," he argues, "they dutifully assented." As a result, the idea of projecting power globally has become "standard practice, a normal condition, one to which no plausible alternatives seem to exist."

The United States today displays certain characteristics of a classical militarist state, as the great modern historian of militarism Alfred Vagts has described it—a society in which military and internal security demands are paramount and whose political imagination is dominated by vast threats yet to be realized. Vagts wrote that militarism has meant "the imposition of heavy burdens on a people for military purposes, to the neglect of welfare and culture." "It exists," he notes, as "a civilian as well as a military phenomenon."

Although aspects of militarism existed in the European professional armies of the pre-Westphalian period, the word "militarism" entered the modern political vocabulary as a term of abuse at the same time as "imperialism" did, during France's Second Empire (1852–70). Modern militarist states, starting with Napoleon III's Second Empire, Vagts argued, have always been vulnerable to narcissism—a charge that could easily be leveled against the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy today.

The U.S. Air Force is obsessively focused on aircraft that are so technologically advanced—such as the B-1 bomber and the F-22 fighter—that they have little practical application in contemporary war; they were designed to counter Soviet weapons systems that never were, and never will be, built. (This is not to speak of the planned hypersonic suborbital bomber to operate along the edge of the atmosphere, scheduled to be rolled out in 2035.) The U.S. Navy, as the military theorist William Lind notes, maintains 11 large aircraft carrier battle groups cruising the seas, "structured to fight the Imperial Japanese Navy," despite the fact that submarines are much more important in countering today's threats.

The United States increasingly finds itself the well-meaning leader that empowers individuals whose entourages often prove unsavory and who themselves develop, to borrow a phrase from former Vice President Dick Cheney, "other priorities." Iraq has been declared, probably with unwarranted optimism, an independent democracy from which the United States will withdraw all its troops next year. Withdrawal seems increasingly the preoccupation of the Obama administration in dealing with Afghanistan as well, at the same time that the Pentagon is building what would appear to be an "enduring" base complex there, able to serve as a center of U.S. strategic power in the region.

Earlier this year, Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, asserted that the United States has designs on Afghanistan's sovereignty. He alluded to the United States' alleged plans to establish permanent military bases in the country and use Afghan territory for a pipeline that would carry Central Asian oil and gas to ports on the Arabian Sea, avoiding the land route through former Soviet states. These remarks coincided with President Barack Obama's visit to Kabul to urge a crackdown by the Karzai government on the corruption supposedly provoking the Taliban's resurgence.

Selig Harrison, along with other U.S. experts on Afghanistan, argues that a settlement allowing the United States to disengage from Afghanistan will only be possible if such an agreement is supported by China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and certain other states in the

region, all of which are disturbed by the expansion of U.S. bases near their borders. The Taliban themselves have made the complete withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces a condition for any peace settlement. This clearly will be a central issue in the Obama review of Afghanistan policy scheduled for December. Withdrawal will be opposed by the Pentagon and by the Republican and the domestic populist opposition to Obama. The U.S. global base system is proving to be a fundamental obstacle to any settlement in the region.

CHECKS AND BALANCES

The United States, now in possession of military forces larger than those of all its rivals and allies combined, began as a nation that abhorred standing armies. The issue of quartering British troops became a serious irritant in relations with Great Britain in the mid-eighteenth century, and taxation of trade to support a British army in the American colonies was one of the principal sources of pre-revolutionary discontent during the quarter century leading up to the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

The U.S. Bill of Rights, appended to the 1787 Constitution, famously provides that "a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." But a federal army is not mentioned until Section 8 of Article I of the Constitution. The relevant clause says, in its entirety, that Congress possesses the power "to raise and support Armies, but no Appropriation of Money to that Use shall be for a longer Term than two Years." A later clause in the same section provides for mobilization of the state militias to "execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions," but the power to appoint militia officers is reserved to the states, and the militias must be trained by the states "according to the discipline prescribed by Congress." Article II of the Constitution, dealing with executive power, says only that the president "shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States."

Despite the nineteenth-century mobilization of the world's first great industrialized army by the Union in the American Civil War, followed by its rapid demobilization afterward, U.S. public opinion until the mid-twentieth century remained hostile to standing armies. At the outbreak of World War II, the U.S. Army was a professional force of 175,000 men, including what was then known as the Army Air Corps. Rapid postwar demobilization was slowed by the outbreak of the Cold War, and thereafter the U.S. military remained a conscript force (without peacetime American precedent) until after the Vietnam War. The U.S. military services thus remained a "citizens' army," and the officer corps included a large and influential complement of mobilized reserve officers and newly commissioned officers from the conscript army.

The most important result of substituting today's professional army for a citizens' army is that it has created an instrument of national power that is no longer directly accountable to the public. During the Bush years, and to an extent

under the Obama administration, it has been used in a manner, and it has employed methods, that would have been unacceptable in the past. Thus, a professional army—supplemented by a nearly equivalent number of civilian mercenaries—that is directly accountable only to the Pentagon exists primarily to augment the national "military-industrial complex" against which President Dwight Eisenhower warned many decades ago. The defense and security industries are today the most important components of the U.S. manufacturing sector, and their corporate interests are now in a position to dominate Congress, as well as an inexperienced administration. Without excessive exaggeration, one might say of the United States today what was once said of Prussia—that it is a state owned by its army.

Between the beginning of the Cold War in Europe and the present war in Afghanistan, a period has passed that included the Korean War; the Vietnam War and the Cambodian invasion; U.S. interventions in Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador (indirectly), and Somalia (in connection with a UN operation, followed by sponsorship of an invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia); and two invasions of Iraq and one of Afghanistan. None except the Gulf War deserves to be called a victory.

The United States' millenarian notions of a national destiny and the militarism that has infected American society have been responsible for a series of wars from which Washington has gained little or nothing, and suffered a great deal, while contributing enormously to the misfortune of others.

Within its borders, the United States is invulnerable to conventional military defeat; that cannot be said of its forces deployed elsewhere. U.S. security is far more likely to be found in a noninterventionist foreign policy designed to produce a negotiated military withdrawal from both Afghanistan and Iraq, without leaving bases behind, and a general disengagement from military interference in the affairs of other societies, leaving them to search for their own solutions to their own problems. So drastic a reversal of U.S. policy will not be possible without heavy political costs, both domestic and foreign. Nevertheless, the time has come for U.S. policymakers to begin considering reversing course.