

## America's Chronic Addictions - Opiates, Donald Trump and War

by Tom Engelhardt via stacey - TomDispatch *Monday, Jul 9 2018, 10:40pm*

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When you think of addiction in America today, one thing comes to mind: the opioid epidemic. And it should. It's serious. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, almost [64,000](#) Americans died of opiate overdoses in 2016 ([more](#) than died in the Vietnam War), an average of 175 people a day. In that year, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration estimated that 11.5 million Americans "misused" pain medication. (Note that such figures are still on the [rise](#).)

Only recently, the surgeon general [issued](#) a rare national advisory "urging more Americans to carry naloxone, a drug used to revive people overdosing on opiates." This crisis of addiction has already [cost](#) the country an estimated \$1 trillion since 2001 and might, in the next three years alone, cost more than half that much again.

The United States, however, has two other crises that, in the long run, will cost Americans far more. Yet they get remarkably little attention as addiction phenomena. The first is so obvious that no one should have to comment on it. Here's the strange thing, though: it's a rare moment when there's any serious analysis of it or real attention given to it as an addiction.

This country (and above all its media) is addicted to Donald J. Trump in a way that no population, no media, possibly not even the Communist Chinese press in the days of Mao Zedong, ever was to any figure. Since he rode that Trump Tower escalator into the presidential race in June 2015 to the tune of Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World" and took out after Mexican "rapists" and future Great Walls, no one -- nothing -- has ever been covered or attended to this way, online or off, in daily life or in our increasingly shared, increasingly addictive media life. (Yes, the Internet and social media are undoubtedly addictions of some sort, too, but let's not head down that road or I'll never stop writing!)

Not Donald Trump's 2016 electoral victory, nor his tax "reform" gift to the 1%, nor his chance to appoint a second Supreme Court justice (with more openings likely to come) -- none of these or anything else he's done or is likely to do will qualify as the truest, deepest, most far-reaching of his triumphs. That can only be the unprecedented way he continues to draw attention. It represents a victory of the first order for him of a unique, almost incomprehensible sort, made more so by the inability of those who report on him to take in what's happened to them or analyze their situation in any serious way.

### Addicted to Trump

Donald J. Trump, as candidate and president, has trumped the attention span of this country, possibly of the planet. Eyes have been focused on him, his insults, his tweets, his passing thoughts, his every comment, his acts, major and minor, and the associated acts and reactions of those who circle around him, as never before in history -- not for a king, an emperor, or a dictator, and certainly not for a president. His truest triumph has been to make himself into the voluntary drug of choice for most of a country and all of the media in a way we've never imagined possible, and for which, it seems, there is no naloxone.

He has, in the deepest sense, turned the media he loves to loathe, thrives on hating, into a genuine mechanism for producing “fake news” -- about him. It’s only real news if you think that The Donald should be the focus of essentially everything, if you believe that nothing else on this planet should take place except refracted through him.

When it comes to the media in particular, Donald Trump is the opioid crisis. He’s their drug of choice. He gets them high. They can’t help themselves, nor can they stop. As head of CBS Leslie Moonves put it during election campaign 2016: “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.” And then he added, “The money’s rolling in and this is fun. I’ve never seen anything like this, and this [is] going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But bring it on, Donald. Keep going.”

And it’s never ended. The president glues eyeballs to papers, to the endlessly talking heads on the cable news networks, to Twitter, to anything that now passes for media, at a time when so many news outfits are in so many other ways coming unglued. More reporters have undoubtedly been assigned to cover him and his acolytes than ever covered anything or anyone else on a day-by-day, week-by-week basis. Every day of Donald Trump’s life is, in coverage terms, something like the equivalent of the Kennedy assassination, which might be thought of as the first 24/7 TV event, or perhaps the 1994 O.J. Simpson white Ford Bronco car chase that was, in some strange way, a preview of this Trumpian media moment.

It really doesn’t matter much what the “story” is when it comes to his presidency. Whatever it is, it’s promptly swarmed by that media without the slightest sense of proportion or any feeling for what actually matters on this planet of ours. In almost every sense, in fact, Donald Trump now regularly blots out the sun.

Take a small incident just over two weeks ago. With a party of family members, Trump Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders stopped off at the Red Hen, a tiny farm-to-table restaurant in Lexington, Virginia. Mid-meal, she was asked to leave by the owner after staff members raised “concerns.” I’m only reminding you of this -- a couple of weeks ago you undoubtedly could have told me every detail -- because it’s already been consigned to the dust bin of history as other Trump-infused tales -- from the resignation of Supreme Court justice Kennedy to prank-calling the president -- have swept it aside. Of course, Sanders’s half-eaten dinner also helped sweep aside previous stories of our time like that message on the back of Melania Trump’s coat on her first trip to the U.S.-Mexico border (“I really don’t care. Do U?”).

When Sanders left that restaurant and then tweeted about it, a storm of coverage, as well as a firestorm of tweets, Facebook posts, insults, and praise about the judgment of the restaurant’s owner, arguments over the ideological polarization of the country, and so much else, including the “weaponization” of the restaurant-review website Yelp, flooded over us. Unrelated restaurants with “Red Hen” in their name elsewhere in the country (or even the world) received threats of all sorts and were inundated with insulting messages as were shops and restaurants that happened to be located near the actual Red Hen.

The story became front-page news nationwide and, for instance, led NBC Nightly News (which I happened to watch) on the evening that the stock market swooned over trade-war fears. In my own hometown paper, the New York Times, it was a front-page story and not one but two reporters were assigned to a crucial sideline piece about why President Trump’s Twitter finger was so slow; why, that is, he waited 48 hours -- two full days! -- before tweeting his support for his press secretary by attacking the Red Hen for having a “filthy” exterior and undoubtedly being “dirty” inside. The Times journalists focused on “the president’s uncharacteristically tepid, delayed response,” wondering

whether it was a sign that Sanders was on her way out. (The Washington Post, on the other hand, dissected the president's response in terms of, as the headline on one of its articles put it, "everything Trump got wrong about Red Hen, in one tweet.") And so it went.

Tell me, then, if this isn't an addiction, what is it? And what's the one thing you know about addictions? Whatever high they give you -- and let's not deny that Donald Trump offers us a constant set of highs (whether as rushes of agreement and pleasure or horror and dismay) -- if you can't stop yourself from taking the drug, day after day, night after night, there will be a price to pay. Somebody better have the equivalent of naloxone on hand.

### Addicted to War

And then there's that other twenty-first-century all-American addiction, in some ways far stranger than the Trumpian one and likely to be no less costly in the long run: addiction to war. Almost 17 years after the Global War on Terror was launched, the highs -- the invasion of Afghanistan! The taking of Kabul! The smashing of Iraq! The capture of Saddam Hussein! -- are long gone. Now exhausted and discouraged, those hooked nonetheless remain unable to stop.

In some ways, addiction may seem like a strange category when applied to this country's war-making, as for most Americans the very opposite seems to be true. Since a series of historic global antiwar protests faded out with the invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003, it's as if most Americans had gone cold turkey on this country's credit-card wars. Willfully demobilized by the top officials of the Bush administration, who preferred to conduct their military operations without citizen or congressional oversight, they simply turned away and went about their business. Meanwhile, America's all-volunteer military, increasingly a kind of foreign legion for much of the population, has continued to fight never-endingly and remarkably fruitlessly across a vast swath of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

The divorce of most Americans from Washington's wars and those fighting them may be less than apparent because, according to the polls, the public has a kind of blind trust and soaring "confidence" in the U.S. military, unlike any other part of the government or, for that matter, the society, and because the urge to "thank" the "warriors" is now such a basic part of American life. But all of that is, I suspect, little more than a massive compensation reaction from a public that otherwise could not care less.

When it comes to Washington's still-spreading war on terror, the media has, if anything, followed suit. Recently, for instance, Reuters correspondent Indrees Ali posted a photo on Twitter of a large, almost empty room filled with chairs, with the caption: "There are exactly four journalists at the Pentagon briefing on Afghanistan." That single image sums up the present situation vividly. Almost 17 years after the invasion of Afghanistan by a military repeatedly hailed as "the finest fighting force the world has ever known," at a moment when Taliban insurgents are again gaining ground, a Pentagon briefing on developments there is of no interest. Yes, events in such wars are still dutifully reported from time to time, but those reports, often tucked away on the inside pages of papers or deep in the nightly news, don't hold a candle to Melania's jacket, the president's latest tweet, or a Red Hen rebuff.

And yet the photo of that Pentagon briefing is deceptive. It leaves out a key group still in the room: those addicted to an American style of war-making through which, year after year, the still-theoretically dominant power on the planet only seems to induce the spread of terror movements, disorder, destruction, and the displacement of increasingly large populations (contributing to a global refugee crisis that is, in its own way, helping to remake the planet).

Missing from that photo are the characters who have OD'd on U.S. military power and yet can't stop mainlining it in ways that have become all-too-familiar since 2001. I'm thinking of the generals of the U.S. military, the men who have led an endless set of campaigns as part of what those inside the Pentagon are now grimly referring to as an "infinite war" leading nowhere. And they're strung out. As Mark Perry reported recently in Foreign Policy, Secretary of Defense James "Mad Dog" Mattis and other American generals, unlike the president's new civilian counselors, National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, are not eager for the next potential war, the one with Iran that already looms on the horizon. They understand that they could launch such a conflict successfully, destroying much of Iran's military (and its nuclear facilities), and still, as with Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and so on, somehow not get out.

And yet, much as they don't want a bright, shiny new war (and who could blame them under the circumstances), they can't imagine leaving the old ones behind either. And that's America's war addiction in a nutshell, one that has long had in its grip most of elite Washington and the rest of a national security state set up around a style of infinite-war-making that must always be fed with ever increasing numbers of taxpayer dollars. Thanks to those dollars, we, the taxpayers, could be thought of as so many street-level drug peddlers in this country's war equivalent of the opioid epidemic. The politicians who feed those dollars into the military maw would be the doctors who prescribe opioids, understanding full-well their ability to hook patients. And the Military-Industrial Complex -- the giant weapons companies and the warrior corporations that now go into action in lock-step with that military -- would be the drug companies that have profited so off the opioid crisis even as they stoked it.

Returning momentarily to Donald Trump, you can feel the power of that war addiction in his inability to fulfill his promise to fight those conflicts in a winning style and, if necessary, quickly extricate the country from what he termed its "\$7 trillion" Greater Middle Eastern disaster. In his own fashion, he, too, has been hooked. And when the increasingly tired and distraught generals he chose to surround himself with proved unpalatable to him, Trump notably picked as replacements civilians guaranteed to keep the ball rolling when it came to America's wars from hell.

So, addiction? If you don't think this country has an addiction crisis (other than opioids), think again.

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