

The United States Is a Force for Death, Chaos and Destruction Across the Planet

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Since 1991, the US has been engaged in a misguided and destructive exercise of triumphalism. In this interview, Engelhardt discusses why the US is an empire of chaos.



Mark Karlin: How much money has gone to the US "war on terror" and what has been the impact of this expenditure?

Tom Engelhardt: The best figure I've seen on this comes from the Watson Institute's Costs of War Project at Brown University, and it's a staggering \$5.6 trillion, including certain future costs to care for this country's war vets. President Trump himself, with his usual sense of accuracy, has inflated that number even more, regularly speaking of [\\$7 trillion](#) being lost somewhere in our never-ending wars in the Greater Middle East. One of these days, he's going to turn out to be right.

As for the impact of such an expenditure in the regions where these wars continue to be fought, largely nonstop, since they were launched just after September 11, 2001, it would certainly include: the spread of terror outfits across the Middle East, parts of Asia and Africa; the creation -- in a region previously autocratic but relatively calm -- of a striking range of failed or failing states; major cities that have been turned into absolute [rubble](#) (with [no money](#) in sight for serious reconstruction); internally [displaced people](#) and waves of refugees at [levels](#) that now match the moment after World War II, when significant parts of the planet were in ruins -- and that's just to start down a list of the true costs of our wars.

At home, in a far quieter way, the impact has been similar. Just imagine, for instance, what our American world would have been like if any significant part of the funds that went into our fruitless, still spreading, now nameless conflicts had been spent on America's [crumbling infrastructure](#), instead of on the rise of the national security state as the unofficial fourth branch of government. (At TomDispatch, Pentagon expert William Hartung has estimated that [approximately](#) \$1 trillion annually goes into that security state and, in the age of Trump, that figure is again on the rise.)

Part of the trouble assessing the "impact" here in the US is that, in this era of public demobilization in terms of our wars, people are encouraged not to think about them at all and they've gotten remarkably little attention. So, sorting out exactly how they've come home -- other than completely

obvious developments like the [militarization of the police](#), the flying of [surveillance drones](#) in our airspace, and so on -- is hard. Most people, for instance, don't grasp something I've long written about at TomDispatch: that Donald Trump would have been inconceivable as president without those disastrous wars, those trillions squandered on them and on the military that's fought them, and that certainly qualifies as "impact" enough.

What makes the US pretension to empire different from previous empires?

As a start, it's worth mentioning that Americans generally don't even think of ourselves as an "empire." Yes, since the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, our politicians and pundits have proudly called this country the "last" or "lone" superpower and the world's most "exceptional" or "indispensable" nation, but an empire? No. You need to go someplace off the mainstream grid -- Truthout or TomDispatch, for instance -- to find anyone talking about us in those terms.

That said, I think that two things have made us different, imperially speaking. The first was that post-1991 sense of ourselves as the ultimate winner of a vast imperial contest, a kind of arms race of many that had gone on since European ships armed with cannon had first broken into the world in perhaps the 15th century and begun to conquer much of it. In that post-Soviet moment of triumphalism, of what seemed to the top dogs in Washington like the ultimate win, a forever victory, there was indeed a sense that there had never been and never would be a power like us. That inflated sense of our imperial self was what sent the geopolitical dreamers of the George W. Bush administration off to, in essence, create a Pax Americana, first in the Greater Middle East, and then perhaps the world, in a fashion never before imagined -- one that, they were convinced, would put the Roman and British imperial moments to shame. And we all know, with the invasion of Iraq, just where that's ended up.

In the years since they launched that ultimate imperial venture in a cloud of hubris, the most striking difference I can see with previous empires is that never has a great power, still in something close to its imperial prime, proven quite so incapable of applying its military and political might in a way that would successfully advance its aims. It has instead found itself overmatched by underwhelming enemy forces and incapable of producing any results other than destruction and further fragmentation across staggeringly large parts of the planet.

Finally, of course, there's climate change -- that is, for the first time in the history of empires, the very well-being of the planet itself is at stake. The game has, so to speak, changed, even if relatively few here have noticed.

Why do you refer to the US as an "empire of chaos"?

This answer follows directly from the last two. The United States is now visibly a force for chaos across significant parts of the planet. Just look, for instance, at the cities -- from Marawi in the Philippines to Mosul and Ramadi in Iraq, Raqqa and Aleppo in Syria, Sirte in Libya, and so on -- that have literally been -- a word I want to bring into the language -- rubbleized, largely by American bombing (though with a helping hand recently from the bomb-makers of the Islamic State). Historically, in the imperial ages that preceded this one, such power, while regularly applied brutally and devastatingly, could also be a way of imposing a grim version of order on conquered and colonized areas. No longer, it seems. We're now on a planet that simply doesn't accept military-first conquest and occupation, no matter the guise under which it arrives (including the spread of "democracy"). So, beware of unleashing modern military power. It turns out to contain within it striking disintegrative forces on a planet that can ill afford such chaos.

You also refer to Washington, DC, as a "permanent war capital" with the generals in ascension under Trump. What does that represent for the war footing of the US?

Well, it's obvious in a way. Washington is now indeed a war capital because the Bush administration launched not just a local response to a relatively small group of jihadis in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, but what its top officials called a "Global War on Terror" -- creating possibly the worst acronym in history: GWOT. And then they instantly began insisting that it could be applied to at least 60 countries supposedly harboring terror groups. That was 2001 and, of course, though the name and acronym were dropped, the war they launched has never ended. In those years, the military, the country's (count 'em) [17 major intelligence agencies](#), and the [warrior corporations](#) of the military-industrial complex have achieved a kind of clout never before seen in the nation's capital. Their rise has really been a bipartisan affair in a city otherwise riven by politics as each party tries to outdo the other in promoting the financing of the national security state. At a moment when putting money into just about anything else that would provide genuine security to Americans (think health care) is always a desperate struggle, funding the Pentagon and the rest of the national security state continues to be a given. That's what it means to be in a "permanent war capital."

In addition, with Donald Trump, the generals of America's losing wars have gained a kind of prominence in Washington that was unknown in a previously civilian capital. The head of the Defense Department, the White House chief of staff, and (until recently when he was succeeded by an even more militaristic civilian) the national security adviser were all generals of those wars -- positions that, in the past, with rare exceptions, were considered civilian ones. In this sense, Donald Trump was less making history with the men he liked to refer to as "my generals" than channeling it.

What is the role of bombing in the US war-making machine?

It's worth remembering, as I've written in the past, that from the beginning, the "war on terror" has been, above all (and despite full-scale invasions and occupations using hundreds of thousands of US ground troops), an air war. It started that way. On September 11, 2001, after all, al-Qaeda sent its air force (four hijacked passenger jets) and its precision weaponry (19 suicidal hijackers) against a set of iconic buildings in the US. Those strikes -- only one of them failed when the passengers on a single jet fought back and it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania -- may represent the most successful use of strategic bombing (that is, air power aimed at the civilian population of, and morale in, an enemy country) in history. At the cost of a mere \$400,000 to \$500,000, Osama bin Laden began an air war of provocation that has never ended.

The US has been bombing, missiling and drone-assassinating ever since. Last year, for instance, US planes dropped an estimated 20,000 bombs just on the Syrian city of Raqqa, the former "capital" of the Islamic State, leaving next to nothing standing. Since the first American planes began dropping bombs (and cluster munitions) in Afghanistan in October 2001, the US Air Force has been in the skies ceaselessly -- skies, by the way, over countries and groups that lack any defenses against air attacks whatsoever. And, of course, it's been a kind of rolling disaster of destruction that has left the equivalent of World Trade Center tower after tower of dead civilians in those lands. In other words, though no one in Washington would ever say such a thing, US air power has functionally been doing Osama bin Laden's job for him, conducting not so much a "war on terror" as a strange kind of war for terror -- one that only promotes the conditions in which it thrives best.

What role did the end of the draft play in enabling an unrestrained US empire of war?

It may have been the crucial moment in the whole process. It was, of course, the decision of then-President Richard Nixon in [January 1973](#), in response to a country swept by a powerful antiwar

movement and a military in near rebellion as the Vietnam War began to wind down. The draft was ended, the all-volunteer military begun and the American people were largely separated from the wars being fought in their name. They were, as I said above, demobilized. Though at the time, the US military high command was doubtful about the move, it proved highly successful in freeing them to fight the endless wars of the 21st century, now being referred to by some in the Pentagon (according to The Washington Post) not as "permanent wars," or even -- as Gen. David Petraeus put it -- a "[generational struggle](#)," but as "[infinite war](#)."

I've lived through two periods of public war mobilization in my lifetime: the World War II era, in which I was born and in which the American people mobilized to support a global war against fascism in every way imaginable, and the Vietnam War, in which Americans (like me as a young man) mobilized against an American war. But who in those years ever imagined that Americans might fight their wars (unsuccessfully) to the end of time without most citizens paying the slightest attention? That's why I've called the losing generals of our endless "war on terror" (and, in a sense, the rest of us as well) "[Nixon's children](#)."

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