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Trump, Empire and Our Long Retreat to Tyranny

By Richard Moser
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There has been a lot of worry about the Constitution and basic democratic rights since Trump's election. And worry we should. But, Trump did not fall from the sky, he is a product of our history.

Over the long course of human history, there has been nothing more hostile to democracies and constitutional republics than empire. Empires destroys republics from the inside out.[1]

And, empires demand and create enemies. In the opening act of our empire we fought our race enemy: the natives we tried to assimilate or eliminate. In the climactic scene of empire building after WWII we fought another “red menace.” the Soviet Union and communism.

But the American people were deeply tired of war. President Truman was convinced that he would have to “scare hell” out of the people to commit the US to Cold War and global empire. So evil was the Soviet Union, so alien was their way of life, that the red scare summoned up its opposite: American identity as innocent, good, chosen and exceptional.

Our new enemy was made out to be an existential threat even though Russia had just lost 20 million people fighting — as our ally — against Nazi Germany. Our global superiority was based largely on the fact that World War II had wrecked every major competitor. The US stood astride the world without equal.

But under the cover of Cold War the US empire all but disappeared from public view. We were not, according to the official story, an empire at all but the world’s greatest democracy defending the free world. We were not to blame for the costs of empire building: it was the Russian’s fault or the Chinese or the Vietnamese or the international communist conspiracy. The tyranny to come for America was sold with carrot and stick. Fear was the opener while pride in our might and exceptional character closed the deal. Today we still cloak empire with wars fought for “humanitarian” reasons.

But no justification could hide the fact that empire changed America forever. A new form of government called the “national security state” now referred to as the “deep state,” emerged to manage our far-flung domain. The changes were stunning and decisively tipped constitutional “checks and balances.” Soon the executive branch exercised sweeping powers far beyond what the US Constitution allowed for.

The Imperial Presidency

The US president has war powers that would make a king jealous. The Constitution is crystal clear: only Congress has the right to declare war. The emergence of an executive that could unilaterally declare war and make continuous war preparations overcame the “separation of powers,” and undermined the rule of law.[2]

Tyranny was sure to follow. It was after all an old story.

In 1793, James Madison, the primary author of the Constitution, reflected on just how important it was to “disarm” the presidency of its “propensity to war.”

In no part of the constitution is more wisdom to be found, than in the clause which confides the question of war or peace to the legislature, and not to the executive department....

The trust and the temptation would be too great for any one man....War is in fact the true nurse of executive aggrandizement.... The strongest passions and most dangerous weaknesses of the

human breast; ambition, avarice, vanity, the honourable or venial love of fame, are all in conspiracy against the desire and duty of peace....

The executive is the department of power most distinguished by its propensity to war: hence it is the practice of all states, *in proportion as they are free*, to disarm this propensity of its influence. [emphasis added]

“In proportion as they are free.” For Madison, the executive’s capacity to declare war has a direct and inverse relationship to freedom.

Not only does this mean that every war since WWII has been illegal — by our own highest law of the land — but that the system of check and balances, so carefully crafted by the framers has been tilted toward tyranny.

Executive power has grown persistently since WWII and every President, Congress and Supreme Court has added and abetting its growth. Only the anti-war movement of the Vietnam Era marshaled popular resistance to slow, for a time, the empire.

After the US lost the Vietnam War the liberal project of “nation-building” could never be fully revived. Nation-building was our illusion and our conceit: we were not aggressors but engaged in the godly task of helping oppressed people build stable democracies and resist communism.

But by the first phase of US war in Afghanistan (1978-1992) the current pattern of disorder and decline emerged. US elites opted for the chaos of weak or failed states. US sponsorship of the Mujahideen gave birth to modern armed “islamic fundamentalism.” The US would come to rely more and more on shifting coalitions of unstable militias prone to terrorism and internecine warfare.

To hide the war and dampen military and civilian dissent the elites grew dependent on corporate mercenaries. And for cover, Bill Clinton sold us “humanitarian war:” noble war, not driven by interest or advantage but for human rights or to end suffering. It is a paternalistic version of nation-building that harkens back to White Man’s Burden.

If this is our history then Trump is very much our President. Trump is an imperial president well suited to a system that values power and authority over democracy and thrives on crisis, chaos and war. And the corporate media agrees that Trump’s wars are full of “heart” and humanitarianism.

Militarism

Before the Korean War the US regularly maintained only a small army and officer corp. In time of war armies were raised by mass conscription and the citizen-soldiers were sent home when the fighting stopped. There was no military-industrial complex. Auto and airplane factories were converted to wartime use and converted back. There were war profiteers, yes, but never a powerful and permanent war industry directly linked to government. American has a violent past, true, but we were not militarists.

President Eisenhower was so disturbed by what he saw that he chose his farewell address to give the country serious warnings about the military-industrial complex.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implication. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted, only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

“The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist....We should take nothing for granted.” Today war is big business and we cannot take democracy for granted.

Secret Police Forces

Alcohol prohibition gave us the FBI, the first national secret police force in the US. But, it was after WWII that the secret police grew and became independent actors in both domestic and international affairs.

Starting with the 1948 Italian elections, the CIA quickly developed a global network based on intervention in elections, the overthrow of governments, and assassination. Secrecy, deception and covert activities beyond the rule of law was standard operating procedure from the beginning.

Truman, one of the chief architects of US empire and the Cold war created the CIA . These new institutions were such a troubling departure from US politics that even he feared that the CIA had gone rouge.

Truman shared his concerns in a public letter:

For some time I have been disturbed by the way CIA has been diverted from its original assignment. It has become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of the Government....I never had any thought that when I set up the CIA that it would be injected into peacetime cloak and dagger operations. Some of the complications and embarrassment I think we have experienced are in part attributable to the fact that this quiet intelligence arm of the President has been so removed from its intended role that it is being interpreted as a symbol of sinister and mysterious foreign intrigue....

Now we have 17 secret police forces and they have become a “policy making arm of government.” They are real players in the domestic politics of the US, intervening in our own elections, and suppressing free speech and dissent by spying routinely on millions of Americans.

The imperial presidency, militarism and secret police forces have hollowed out the US Constitution and left our democracy in tatters. Tyranny is the price of empire. The struggle against war and empire is essential to the struggle for democracy. We cannot have one without the other. Real resistance to Trump will be made by those willing to confront the history which made Trump possible.

Notes.

1) For more on US empire see the work of Chalmers Johnson, especially, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*. Andrew Bacevich also presents many well-documented and argued accounts. For example see *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*.

2) Ryan Alford, *Permanent State of Emergency: Unchecked Executive Power and the Demise of the Rule of Law*.