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Empire of Absurdity: Recycled Neocons, Recycled Enemies

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There are times when I wish that the United States would just drop the charade and declare itself a global empire. As a [veteran](#) of two imperial wars, a witness to the dark underside of America's empire-denial, I've grown tired of the equivocation and denials from senior policymakers. The U.S. *can't* be an empire, we're told, because – unlike the Brits and Romans – America doesn't annex territories outright, and our school children don't color its colonies in red-white-and-blue on cute educational maps.

But this distinction, at root, is rather superficial. Conquest, colonization, and annexation are so 19th century – Washington has moved beyond the overt and engages in the (not-so) subtle modern form of imperialism. America's empire over the last two decades – under Democrats and Republicans – has used a range of tools: economic, military, political, to topple regimes, instigate coups, and starve "enemy" civilians. Heck, it didn't even *start* with 9/11 – bullying foreigners and overturning uncooperative regimes is as American as apple pie.

Still, observing post-9/11, post-Iraq/Afghanistan defeat, Washington play imperialism these days is tragically absurd. The emperor has no clothes, folks. Sure, America (for a few more fleeting years) boasts the world's dominant economy, sure its [dotted](#) the globe with a few hundred military bases, and sure it's military still [outspends](#) the next seven competitors *combined*. Nonetheless, what's remarkable, what constitutes the real story of 2019, is this: the US empire can't seem to accomplish anything anymore, can't seem to bend *anybody* to its will. It's almost sad to watch. America, the big-hulking has-been on the block, still struts its stuff, but most of the world simply ignores it.

Make no mistake, Washington isn't done trying; it's happy to keep throwing good money (and blood) at bad: to the [tune of](#) a cool \$6 trillion, 7,000 troop deaths, and 500,000 foreign deaths – including maybe 240,000 civilians. But what's it all been for? The world is no safer, global terror attacks have only increased, and Uncle Sam just can't seem to achieve any of its preferred policy goals.

Think on it for a second: Russia and Iran "won" in Syria; the Taliban and Pakistan are about ready to "win" in Afghanistan; Iran is more influential than ever in Iraq; the Houthis won't quit in Yemen; Moscow is keeping Crimea; Libya remains unstable; North Korea ain't giving up its nukes; and China's power continues to grow in *its* version of the Caribbean – the South China Sea. No amount of American cash, no volume of our soldiers' blood, no escalation in

drone strikes or the conventional bombing of brown folks, has favorably changed the calculus in any of these regional conflicts.

What does this tell us? Quite a lot, I'd argue – but not what the neoliberal/neoconservative alliance of pundits and policymakers are selling. See for these unrepentant militarists the problem is always the same: Washington didn't use *enough* force, didn't spend *enough* blood and treasure. So is the solution: more defense spending, more CIA operations, more saber-rattling, and more global military interventions.

No, the inconvenient truth is as simple as it is disturbing to red-blooded patriots. To wit, the United States – or any wannabe hegemon – simply doesn't possess the *capability* to shape the world in its own image. See those pesky locals – Arabs, Asians, Muslims, Slavs – don't know what's good for them, don't understand that (obviously) there is a secret American zipped inside each of their very bodies, ready to burst out if given a little push!

It turns out that low-tech, cheap insurgent tactics, when combined with impassioned nationalism, can bog down the "world's best military" indefinitely. It seems, too, that other regional heavyweights – Russia, China, Iran, North Korea – stand ready to call America's nuclear bluff. That they know the US all-volunteer military and consumerist economy can't ultimately absorb the potential losses a conventional war would demand. Even scarier for the military-industrial-congressional-media establishment is the logical extension of all this accumulated failure: the questionable efficacy of military force in the 21st century.

Rather than recognize the limits of American military, economic, and political power, Bush II, Obama, and now Trump, have simply dusted off the old playbook. It's reached the level of absurdity under the unhinged regime of Mr. Trump. Proverbially blasting Springsteen's "Glory Days," as its foreign policy soundtrack, the Donald and company have doubled down. Heck, if Washington can't get its way in Africa, Europe, Asia, or the Mideast, well why not clamp down in our own hemisphere, our traditional sphere of influence – South and Central America.

Enter the lunacy of the current Venezuela controversy. Trump's team saw a golden opportunity in this socialist, backwater petrostate. Surely here, in nearby Monroe Doctrine country, Uncle Sam could get his way, topple the Maduro regime, and coronate the insurgent (though questionably legitimate) Juan Guaido. It's early 20th century Yankee imperialism reborn. Everything seemed perfect. Trump could recall the specter of America's tried and true enemy – "evil" socialism – cynically (and absurdly) [equating](#) Venezuelan populism with some absurd Cold-War-era existential threat to the nation. The idea that Venezuela presents a challenge on the scale of Soviet Russia is actually farcical. What's more, and this is my favorite bit of irrationality, we were all recently treated to a game of "I know you are but what am I?" from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who (with a straight face) [claimed](#) Cuba, tiny island Cuba, was the *real* "imperialist" in Venezuela.

Next, in a move reminiscent of some sort of macabre 1980's theme party, Trump resuscitated Elliot Abrams – you know, the convicted felon of [Iran-Contra](#) infamy, to serve as Washington's special envoy to embattled Venezuela. Who better to act as "fair arbiter" in that country than a war-criminal with the blood of a few hundred thousand Central Americans (remember the Contras?!?) on his hands back in the the good old (Reagan) days.

Despite all this: America's military threats, bellicose speechifying, brutal sanctions, and Cold War-style conflict-framing, the incumbent Maduro seems firmly in control. This isn't to say that Venezuelans don't have genuine grievances with the Maduro government (they do), but for now at least, it appears the military is staying loyal to the president, Russia/China are filling in the humanitarian aid gaps, and Uncle Sam is about to chalk up another loss on the world scene. Ultimately, whatever the outcome, the crisis will only end with a *Venezuelan* solution.

America's impotence would almost be sad to watch, if, and only if, it wasn't all so tragic for the Venezuelan people.

So Trump and his recycled neocons will continue to rant and rave and threaten Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, and so on and so forth. America will still flex its aging, sagging muscles – a reflexive habit at this point.

Only now it'll seem sad. Because no one is paying attention anymore.

The opposite of love is isn't hate – it's indifference.

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