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The Riptide of American Militarism

Put up with me for just a moment while I wax literary. It turns out that, if French novelist Marcel Proust lived today, he might have had to retitle his Remembrance of Things Past as Remembrance of Things Present, or even more sadly, Things Future. As an ex-military man who lived through part of the Cold War in uniform, let me make my point, in terms of the Pentagon and an ever-growing atmosphere of American militarism, this way: I love used bookstores. I've been browsing in them since my teens. I was, then, an early fan of Stephen King, the famed horror-story writer. Admittedly, today I'm more likely to browse the history section, which has horrors enough for us all, many of which eclipse even the most fevered imaginings of King, though Pennywise the Clown in It still gives me the creeps.

A while back, speaking of things not past, I stumbled across Senator J. William Fulbright's 1970 book The Pentagon Propaganda Machine and, out of curiosity, bought it for the princely sum of five dollars. Now, talk about creepy. Fulbright, who left the Senate in 1974 and died in 1995, noted a phenomenon then that should ring a distinct bell today. Americans, he wrote, "have grown distressingly used to war." He then added a line that still couldn't be more up to date: "Violence is our most important product." Congress, he complained (and this, too, should ring a distinct bell in 2019), was shoveling money at the Pentagon "with virtually no questions asked," while costly weapons systems were seen mainly "as a means of prosperity," especially for the weapons makers of the military-industrial complex. "Militarism has been creeping up on us," he warned, and the American public, conditioned by endless crises and warnings of

war, had grown numb, leaving “few, other than the young, [to] protest against what is happening.”

Back then, of course, the bogeyman that kept the process going was Communism. America’s exaggerated fear of Communism then (and terrorism now) strengthened militarism at home in a myriad of ways while, as Fulbright put it, “undermining democratic procedure and values.” And doesn’t that ring a few bells, too? Complicit in all this was the Pentagon’s own propaganda machine, which worked hard “to persuade the American people that the military is good for you.”

Perhaps my favorite passage from that book was a message the senator received from a citizen who had attended a Pentagon rah-rah “informational seminar.” Writing to Fulbright, he suggested that “the greatest threat to American national security is the American Military Establishment and the no-holds-barred type of logic it uses to justify its zillion-dollar existence.”

In a rousing conclusion on the “dangers of the military sell” that seems no less apt nearly a half-century later, Fulbright warned that America’s “chronic state of war” was generating a “monster [military] bureaucracy.” Citing the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, he noted how “the mindless violence of war” was eroding America’s moral values and ended by emphasizing that dealing with the growth of immoral militarism was vitally important to the country’s future.

“The best defense against militarism is peace; the next best thing is the vigorous practice of democracy,” he noted, citing the dissenters of his day who opposed America’s murderous war in Southeast Asia. And he added a warning no less applicable today: Americans shouldn’t put their faith in senior military men whose “parochial talents” were too narrow “to equip them with the balance of judgment needed to play the political role they now hold in our society.”

Reading Fulbright today, I couldn’t help but recall one of my dad’s favorite sayings, translated from the French: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Sure, the weaponry may be upgraded (drones with Hellfire missiles rather than bombers dropping napalm); the names of the countries may be different (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia rather than Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia); even the stated purpose of the wars of the moment may have altered (fighting terrorism rather than defeating Communism); but over the last 50 years, the most fundamental things have remained remarkably consistent: militarism, violence, the endless feeding of the military-industrial complex,

the growth of the national security state, and wars, ever more wars, always purportedly waged in the name of peace.

Sometimes when you buy a used book, it comes with a bonus. This one held between its pages a yellowed clipping of a contemporary New York Times review with the telling title, “O What a Lovely Pentagon.” In agreeing with Fulbright, the reviewer, Herbert Mitgang, himself a veteran of World War II, wrote:

“To keep up the [Pentagon] budgets, all three services compete for bigger and better armaments in coordination with the publicity salesmen from the major corporations — for whom retired generals and admirals serve as front men. Thousands of uniformed men and millions of dollars are involved in hard-selling the Pentagon way of life.”

Change “millions” to “billions” and Mitgang’s point remains as on target as ever.

Citing another book under review, which critiqued U.S. military procurement practices, Mitgang concluded: “What emerges here is a permanent floating crap game with the taxpayer as loser and Congress as banker, shelling out for Pentagon and peace profiteers with an ineptitude that would bankrupt any other business.”

Spot on, Herb Mitgang, who perhaps played his share of craps during his Army service!

As I read Fulbright’s almost 50-year-old polemic and Mitgang’s hard-hitting review, I asked myself, how did the American people come to forget, or perhaps never truly absorb, such lessons? How did we stop worrying about war and come to love the all-volunteer military quite so much? (Thank you for your service!) So much so that, today, we engorge the Pentagon and the rest of the national security state with well more than a trillion taxpayer dollars annually — and the power to match.

The Pentagon as a Parasitic Cowbird

In 2019, most Americans see the Pentagon and the U.S. military as this country’s protectors — a force for good, perhaps the equivalent of an eagle, that national symbol, soaring over an endangered land. What if, however, we saw the Pentagon not as a noble bird, a symbol of freedom and strength, but as a parasitic one? What if the avian image that came to mind was the opportunistic cowbird?

I thought of this due to a recent little drama in my own backyard. There, I spied a nest built by a pair of yellow warblers. It had five eggs in it, and I was able to get a photo of them. I didn’t notice at the time — because I was taking care not to linger — that one egg was significantly larger than the others with different markings on it. When they hatched,

one chick was also bigger, pushier, louder, more insistent, and hungrier than the others. It turned out to be a cowbird! Like the more famous cuckoo, cowbirds lay their eggs in other birds' nests and trick them into raising their chicks. In the end, those two adult yellow warblers tirelessly and obliviously fed that alien chick, as their own tiny babes were crowded out and died. The cowbird managed to consume everything, its cavernous mouth eternally clamoring for more.

I assume by now that you get where I'm going with this. Think of that greedy cowbird as the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex in which it's enmeshed. And we American taxpayers, through our bought-and-paid-for representatives in Congress, are those misguided yellow warblers, continually feeding the equivalent of our very own cowbird chick, now grown to tremendous size and still crying out for more. What we're feeding it, of course, is the very promise of America, as it starves our real chicks, precious funding for education, infrastructure, the environment, and health care.

Of course, my analogy is imperfect. After all, that cowbird chick fledged quickly and flew away, releasing the warbler parents from their sad and misbegotten duty. The Pentagon and the rest of the national security state never fledge. They never leave the nest. They're always crying for more money.

Here's the truth of it, as I see it these days: if Americans are ever to gain control over that national security state, they will first have to recognize its parasitic nature, and the way it continues to stuff its greedy mouth with our cash, which is killing the best hopes for the future of our country.

Another Lesson from Nature — This Time from the Sea

A friend of mine was recently doing research in the papers of Matthew Ridgway, the celebrated general of both World War II and the Korean War. There, he came across a 1940 statement from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Created by scholars as World War I was ending, originally to advise the administration of President Woodrow Wilson, the CFR typically offers presidents a somewhat broader range of opinions than they usually get from senior military officers and other Washington insiders.

As Americans wrestled with the possibility of finding themselves in a second looming world war, what advice did the CFR have for then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1940?

“For Germany and Italy, especially, and for Russia and Japan, to a somewhat lesser extent, military power has come to be the ultimate *raison d'être* of the state, while war

itself is regarded as a natural and ennobling process in the international struggle for existence. The non-totalitarian world, on the contrary, still clings to a philosophy in which military power is regarded as a necessary attribute, but not a primary goal, of the national sovereignty — a philosophy which considers war as an aberration from what should be the peaceful norm of human development... If we fail to produce an alternative to the use of force in the totalitarian philosophy, if we fail to demonstrate that our international society holds more hope for a peaceful and profitable future than theirs, then the United States (and other like-minded nations) will be forced into a defensive type of attitude which makes no converts and holds no friends.”

Such statements make me nostalgic. Remember when America was part of the “non-totalitarian world”? Remember when our presidents didn’t boast of having the greatest military in all of history? Remember when our generals didn’t speak proudly of engaging in unending “generational” wars as if they were the ultimate test of our mettle? Remember when we truly saw war as an “aberration,” something both undesirable and antithetical to democracy? Remember when our most basic urge was, if humanly possible, to swim vigorously away from war’s storm clouds toward the shores of “a peaceful and profitable future”?

Yes, in December 1941, the American people did finally begin to mobilize in a big way and march off to war, however reluctantly, and, in the end, they did decisively defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. But also remember how quickly, in the wake of that war, Americans expected that their vast wartime military would be demobilized (and indeed it would, however briefly).

Yet here’s the sad thing: for Americans, World War II, like its prequel, proved to be anything but a war to end all wars. In its aftermath, new rumors of war emerged. Far too quickly, the U.S. found itself in a riptide of never-ending war (whether “hot” or “cold”) and preparations for yet more of the same, all of which pushed us ever deeper into the colder waters of militarism.

Such an oceanic current is a tricky thing. Caught up in war’s version of the same, from the Cold War to today, Washington has embraced the challenge with ever more weaponry, ever more troops and bases across the planet, ever more military spending, violence, and war.

Nineteen years into a new century, with its forever wars on terror still ongoing across startlingly large stretches of the planet, the U.S. military is now turning as well to

preparations for future wars with its so-called peer competitors (China and Russia). No surprise, then, that the country seems to be drowning in militarism and exhausting what's left of our democratic spirit. It has, in almost any imaginable sense, been swept up in a riptide of militarism.

As in the actual ocean, so in the ocean of militarism, such currents are escapable, but only by using the strokes of a functioning democracy that, in this Trumpian age, seem increasingly less available to us. Collectively, we would have to swim calmly on a course parallel to that rip current, evading its undertow of relentless violence, until we finally escaped its pull. Only then could we turn and swim vigorously toward something generationally meaningful: a shared commitment to averting and ending the all-too-real horrors of today's forever wars.

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