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## Overwrought Empire

By Tom Engelhardt

October 9, 2012

Americans lived in a “[victory culture](#)” for much of the twentieth century. You could say that we experienced an almost 75-year stretch of triumphalism — think of it as the real “American Century” — from World War I to the end of the Cold War, with time off for a destructive stalemate in Korea and a defeat in Vietnam too shocking to absorb or shake off.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, it all seemed so obvious. Fate had clearly dealt Washington a royal flush. It was victory with a capital V. The United States was, after all, the last standing superpower, after centuries of unceasing great power rivalries on the planet. It had a military beyond compare and no enemy, hardly a “rogue state,” on the horizon. It was almost unnerving, such clear sailing into a dominant future, but a moment for the ages nonetheless. Within a decade, pundits in Washington were [hailing us](#) as “the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome.”

And here’s the odd thing: in a sense, little has changed since then and yet everything seems different. Think of it as the American imperial paradox: everywhere there are now “threats” against our well-being which seem to demand action and yet nowhere are there commensurate enemies to go with them. Everywhere the U.S. military still reigns supreme by almost any measure you might care to apply; and yet — in case the paradox has escaped you — nowhere can it achieve its goals, however modest.

At one level, the American situation should simply take your breath away. Never before in modern history had there been an arms race of only one or a great power confrontation of only one. And at least in military terms, just as the [neoconservatives imagined](#) in those early years of the twenty-first century, the United States remains the “sole superpower” or even “hyperpower” of planet Earth.

## **The Planet’s Top Gun**

And yet the more dominant the U.S. military becomes in its ability to destroy and the more its forces are spread across the globe, the more the defeats and semi-defeats pile up, the more the missteps and mistakes grow, the more the strains show, the more [the suicides rise](#), the more the nation’s treasure [disappears](#) down a black hole — and in response to all of this, the more moves the Pentagon makes.

A great power without a significant enemy? You might have to go back to the Roman Empire at its height or some Chinese dynasty in full flower to find anything like it. And yet Osama bin Laden is dead. Al-Qaeda is reportedly a shadow of its former self. The great regional threats of the moment, North Korea and Iran, are regimes held together by baling wire and the suffering of their populations. The only incipient great power rival on the planet, China, has [just launched](#) its first aircraft carrier, a refurbished Ukrainian throwaway from the 1990s on whose deck the country has no planes capable of landing.

The U.S. has [1,000](#) or more bases around the world; other countries, a [handful](#). The U.S. spends as much on its military as the next [14 powers](#) (mostly allies) combined. In fact, it’s investing an estimated [\\$1.45 trillion](#) to produce and operate a single future aircraft, the F-35 — more than any country, the U.S. included, now spends on its national defense annually.

The U.S. military is singular in other ways, too. It alone has divided the globe — the complete world — into [six “commands.”](#) With (lest anything be left out) an added command, [Stratcom](#), for the heavens and another, recently established, for the only space not previously occupied, [cyberspace](#), where we’re already unofficially “[at war.](#)” No other country on the planet thinks of itself in faintly comparable military terms.

When its high command plans for its future “needs,” thanks to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, they repair (don’t say “retreat”) to a military base south of the capital where they argue out their future and war-game various possible crises while [striding across](#) a map of the world larger than a basketball court. What other military would come up with such a method?

The president now has at his command not one, but two private armies. The first is the CIA, which in [recent years](#) has been [heavily militarized](#), is overseen by a former four-star general (who calls the job “[living the dream](#)”), and is running its own private assassination campaigns and drone air wars throughout the Greater Middle East. The second is an [expanding elite](#), the Joint Special Operations Command, [cocooned](#) inside the U.S. military, members of whom are now deployed to hot spots around the globe.

The U.S. Navy, with its [11 nuclear-powered aircraft carrier](#) task forces, is dominant on the global waves in a way that only the British Navy might once have been; and the U.S. Air Force controls the global skies in much of the world in a totally uncontested fashion. (Despite numerous wars and conflicts, the [last](#) American plane possibly downed in aerial combat was in the first Gulf War in 1991.) Across much of the global south, there is no sovereign space Washington's drones can't penetrate to kill those [judged](#) by the White House to be threats.

In sum, the U.S. is now the sole planetary [Top Gun](#) in a way that empire-builders once undoubtedly fantasized about, but that none from Genghis Khan on have ever achieved: alone and essentially uncontested on the planet. In fact, by every measure (except success), the likes of it has never been seen.

### **Blindsided by Predictably Unintended Consequences**

By all the usual measuring sticks, the U.S. should be supreme in a historically unprecedented way. And yet it couldn't be more obvious that it's not, that despite all the bases, elite forces, private armies, drones, aircraft carriers, wars, conflicts, strikes, interventions, and clandestine operations, despite a [labyrinthine intelligence bureaucracy](#) that never seems to stop growing and into which we pour a minimum of [\\$80 billion a year](#), nothing seems to work out in an imperially satisfying way. It couldn't be more obvious that this is not a glorious dream, but some kind of ever-expanding imperial nightmare.

This should, of course, have been self-evident since at least early 2004, less than a year after the Bush administration invaded and occupied Iraq, when the roadside bombs started to explode and the suicide bombings to mount, while the comparisons of the United States to Rome and of a prospective *Pax Americana* in the Greater Middle East to the *Pax Romana* vanished like a morning mist on a blazing day. Still, the wars against relatively small, ill-armed sets of insurgents dragged toward their dimly predictable ends. (It says the world that, after almost 11 years of war, the 2,000th U.S. military death in Afghanistan [occurred](#) at the hands of an Afghan "ally" in an "insider attack.") In those years, Washington continued to be regularly blindsided by the unintended consequences of its military moves. Surprises — none pleasant — became the order of the day and victories proved vanishingly rare.

One thing seems obvious: a superpower military with unparalleled capabilities for one-way destruction no longer has the more basic ability to impose its will anywhere on the planet. Quite the opposite, U.S. military power has been remarkably discredited globally by the most pitiful of forces. From Pakistan to Honduras, just about anywhere it goes in the old colonial or neocolonial world, in those regions known in the contested Cold War era as the Third World, resistance of one unexpected sort or another arises and failure ensues in some often long-drawn-out and spectacular fashion.

Given the lack of enemies — a few thousand *jihadis*, a small set of minority insurgencies, a couple of feeble regional powers — why this is so, what exactly the force is that prevents Washington's success, remains mysterious. Certainly, it's in some way related to the more than half-century of decolonization movements, rebellions, and insurgencies that were a feature of the previous century.

It also has something to do with the way economic heft has spread beyond the U.S., Europe, and Japan — with the rise of the “tigers” in Asia, the explosion of the Chinese and Indian economies, the advances of Brazil and Turkey, and the movement of the planet toward some kind of genuine economic multipolarity. It may also have something to do with the end of the Cold War, which put an end as well to several centuries of imperial or great power competition and left the sole “victor,” it now seems clear, heading toward the exits wreathed in self-congratulation.

Explain it as you will, it’s as if the planet itself, or humanity, had somehow been **inoculated** against the imposition of imperial power, as if it now rejected it whenever and wherever applied. In the previous century, it took a half-nation, North Korea, backed by Russian supplies and Chinese troops to fight the U.S. to a draw, or a popular insurgent movement backed by a local power, North Vietnam, backed in turn by the Soviet Union *and* China to defeat American power. Now, small-scale minority insurgencies, largely using roadside bombs and suicide bombers, are fighting American power to a draw (or worse) with no great power behind them at all.

Think of the growing force that resists such military might as the equivalent of the “dark matter” in the universe. The evidence is in. We now know (or should know) that it’s there, even if we can’t see it.

### **Washington’s Wars on Autopilot**

After the last decade of military failures, stand-offs, and frustrations, you might think that this would be apparent in Washington. After all, the U.S. is now visibly an overextended empire, its sway waning from the Greater Middle East to Latin America, the **limits of its power** increasingly evident. And yet, here’s the curious thing: two administrations in Washington have drawn none of the obvious conclusions, and no matter how the presidential election turns out, it’s already clear that, in this regard, nothing will change.

Even as military power has proven itself a bust again and again, our policymakers have come to rely ever more completely on a military-first response to global problems. In other words, we are not just a classically overextended empire, but also an overwrought one operating on some kind of militarized autopilot. Lacking is a learning curve. By all evidence, it’s not just that there isn’t one, but that there can’t be one.

Washington, it seems, now has only one mode of thought and action, no matter who is at the helm or what the problem may be, and it always involves, directly or indirectly, openly or clandestinely, the application of militarized force. Nor does it matter that each further application only destabilizes some region yet more or undermines further what once were known as “American interests.”

Take Libya, as an example. It briefly seemed to count as a rare American military success story: a decisive intervention in support of a rebellion against a brutal dictator — so brutal, in fact, that the CIA previously **shipped** “terrorist suspects,” Islamic rebels fighting against the Gadhafi regime, there for torture. No U.S. casualties resulted, while American and NATO air strikes were decisive in bringing a set of ill-armed, ill-organized rebels to power.

In the world of unintended consequences, however, the fall of Gadhafi sent Tuareg mercenaries from his militias, armed with high-end weaponry, [across the border](#) into Mali. There, when the dust settled, the whole northern part of the country had come unhinged and fallen under the sway of Islamic extremists and al-Qaeda wannabes as other parts of North Africa threatened to destabilize. At the same time, of course, the first American casualties of the intervention occurred when Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans died in an attack on the Benghazi consulate and a local “safe house.”

With matters worsening regionally, the response couldn't have been more predictable. As Greg Miller and Craig Whitlock of the *Washington Post* recently [reported](#), in ongoing secret meetings, the White House is planning for military operations against al-Qaeda-in-the-Magreb (North Africa), now armed with weaponry pillaged from Gadhafi's stockpiles. These plans evidently include the approach used in Yemen (U.S. special forces on the ground and CIA drone strikes), or a Somalia “formula” (drone strikes, special forces operations, CIA operations, and the support of African proxy armies), or even at some point “the possibility of direct U.S. intervention.”

In addition, Eric Schmitt and David Kilpatrick of the *New York Times* [report](#) that the Obama administration is “preparing retaliation” against those it believes killed the U.S. ambassador, possibly including “drone strikes, special operations raids like the one that killed Osama bin Laden, and joint missions with Libyan authorities.” The near certainty that, like the previous intervention, this next set of military actions will only further destabilize the region with yet more unpleasant surprises and unintended consequences hardly seems to matter. Nor does the fact that, in crude form, the results of such acts are known to us ahead of time have an effect on the unstoppable urge to plan and order them.

Such situations are increasingly [legion](#) across the Greater Middle East and elsewhere. Take one other tiny example: Iraq, from which, after almost a decade-long military disaster, the “last” U.S. units essentially fled in the [middle of the night](#) as 2011 ended. Even in those last moments, the Obama administration and the Pentagon were [still trying](#) to keep significant numbers of U.S. troops there (and, in fact, did manage to [leave behind](#) possibly several hundred as trainers of elite Iraqi units). Meanwhile, Iraq has been supportive of the embattled Syrian regime and drawn ever closer to Iran, even as its own sectarian strife has ratcheted upward. Having watched this unsettling fallout from its last round in the country, [according to the New York Times](#), the U.S. is now negotiating an agreement “that could result in the return of small units of American soldiers to Iraq on training missions. At the request of the Iraqi government, according to General Caslen, a unit of Army Special Operations soldiers was recently deployed to Iraq to advise on counterterrorism and help with intelligence.”

Don't you just want to speak to those negotiators the way you might to a child: No, don't do that! The urge to return to the scene of their previous disaster, however, seems unshakable. You could offer various explanations for why our policymakers, military and civilian, continue in such a repetitive — and even from an imperial point of view — self-destructive vein in situations where unpleasant surprises are essentially guaranteed and lack of success a given. Yes, there is the military-industrial complex to be fed. Yes, we are interested in the control of crucial resources, especially energy, and so on.

But it's probably more reasonable to say that a deeply militarized mindset and the global maneuvers that go with it are by now just part of the way of life of a Washington eternally "at war." They are the tics of a great power with the equivalent of Tourette's Syndrome. They happen because they can't help but happen, because they are engraved in the policy DNA of our national security complex, and can evidently no longer be altered. In other words, they can't help themselves.

That's the only logical conclusion in a world where it has become ever less imaginable to do the obvious, which is far less or nothing at all. (Northern Chad? When did it become crucial to our well being?) Downsizing the mission? Inconceivable. Thinking the unthinkable? Don't even give it a thought!

What remains is, of course, a self-evident formula for disaster on autopilot. But don't tell Washington. It won't matter. Its denizens can't take it in.