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The Perils of Endless War

By Tommy Raskin
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War tends to perpetuate itself. As soon as one brute gets killed, another takes his place; when the new guy falls, another materializes.

Consider Richard Nixon's intensification of the American war on Cambodia. In hopes of maintaining an advantage over the Communists as he withdrew American troops from Southeast Asia, Nixon ravaged Vietnam's western neighbor with approximately 500,000 tons of bombs between 1969 and 1973. But instead of *destroying* the Communist menace, these attempts to buttress Nguyen Van Thieu's South Vietnamese government and then Lon Nol's Cambodian government only *transformed* it. The bombings led many of Nixon's early targets to desert the eastern region of the country in favor of Cambodia's interior where they organized with the Khmer Rouge.

As a CIA official noted in 1973, the Khmer Rouge started to "us[e] damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda." By appealing to Cambodians who were affected by the bombing raids, this brutal Communist organization, a peripheral batch of 10,000 fighters in 1969, had expanded by 1973 into a formidable army with 20 times as many members. Two years later, they seized control of Phnom Penh and murdered more than one million of their compatriots in a grisly genocide.

The following decade, when war erupted between the forces of Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, the United States hedged its bets by providing military

assistance to both governments as they slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people. But when Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, ousted the emir, and ultimately assassinated about 1,000 Kuwaitis, the United States turned on its former ally with an incursion that directly killed 3,500 innocent Iraqis and suffocated 100,000 others through the destruction of Iraqi infrastructure. The US also maintained an embargo against Iraq throughout the 1990s, a program that contributed to the deaths of 500,000 Iraqis and that UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq Dennis Halliday deemed “genocidal” when he explained his 1998 resignation.

The newly restored Kuwaiti government, for its part, retaliated against minority groups for their suspected “collaboration” with the Iraqi occupiers. The government threw Palestinians out of schools, fired its Palestinian employees, and threatened thousands with “arbitrary arrest, torture, rape, and murder.” Beyond that, Kuwait interdicted the reentry of more than 150,000 Palestinians and tens of thousands of Bedoons who had evacuated Kuwait when the tyrant Saddam took over. Thus, years of American maneuvering to achieve peace and security – by playing Iran and Iraq off of each other, by privileging Kuwaiti authoritarians over Iraqi authoritarians, by killing tens of thousands of innocent people who got in the way – failed.

The chase continues today as the United States targets the savage “Islamic State,” another monster that the West inadvertently helped create by assisting foreign militants. History suggests that this war against Islamism, if taken to its logical extreme, will prove to be an endless game of whack-a-mole. Yes, our government can assassinate some terrorists; what it cannot do is stop aggrieved civilian victims of Western bombings from replacing the dead by becoming terrorists themselves. Furthermore, even if ISIS disappeared tomorrow, there would still exist soldiers – in Al-Qaeda, for instance – prepared to fill the void. That will remain true no matter how many bombs the West drops, no matter how many weapons it tenders to foreign militias, no matter how many authoritarian governments it buttresses in pursuit of “national security.”

So, what are we to do when foreign antagonists, whatever the source of their discontent, urge people to attack us? We should abandon the Sisyphean task of eradicating anti-American sentiments abroad and invest in security at home. Gathering foreign intelligence is important when it allows us to strengthen our defenses *here*, but bombing people in Iraq and Syria, enabling the Saudi murder of Yemenis, and deploying troops to Cameroon are futile steps when enemy organizations can constantly replenish their supply of fighters by propagandizing among natives who deplore Western intervention.

This understanding, though underappreciated in contemporary American government, reflects a noble American tradition. John Quincy Adams, for his part, loved an America that “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Decades later, Jeannette Rankin doubted the benefits of American interventionism, contending that “you can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake.” Martin Luther King Jr. warned that “violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones.” These leaders adamantly rejected an American politics of unending aggressive war. It is time for us to do the same.