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## US Military Pivots to Africa and the News Is Grim

By Tom Engelhardt  
August 2, 2016

Someday, someone will write a history of the U.S. national security state in the twenty-first century and, if the first decade and a half are any yardstick, it will be called something like *State of Failure*. After all, almost 15 years after the U.S. invaded the Taliban’s Afghanistan, launching the second American Afghan War of the past half-century, U.S. troops are still there, their “withdrawal” halted, their rules of engagement once again widened to allow American troops and air power to accompany allied Afghan forces into battle, and the Taliban on the rise, having taken more territory (and briefly one northern provincial capital) than at any time since that movement was crushed in the invasion of 2001.

Thirteen years after George W. Bush and his top officials, dreaming of controlling the oil heartlands, launched the invasion of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq (the second Iraq War of our era), Washington is now in the third iteration of the same, with 6,000 troops (and thousands of private contractors) back in that country and a vast air campaign underway to destroy the Islamic State. With modest numbers of special operations troops on the ground and another major air campaign, Washington is also now enmeshed in a complex and so far disastrous war in Syria. And if you haven’t been counting, that’s three wars gone wrong.

Then, of course, there was the American (and NATO) intervention in Libya in 2011, which cracked that autocratic country open and made way for the rise of Islamic extremist movements there, as well as the most powerful Islamic State franchise outside Syria and Iraq. Today, plans are evidently being drawn up for yet more air strikes, special operations raids, and the like there.

Toss in as well Washington's never-ending drone war in Pakistan's tribal borderlands, its disastrous attempt to corral al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen (leading to a grim and horrifying Saudi-led, American-supported internecine conflict in that country), and the unending attempt to destroy al-Shabaab in Somalia, and you have at least seven wars and conflicts in the Greater Middle East, all about to be handed on by President Obama to the next president with no end in sight, no real successes, nothing. In these same years Islamic terror movements have only spread and grown stronger under the pressure of the American war machine.

It's not as if Washington doesn't know this. It's quite obvious and, as *TomDispatch* Managing Editor Nick Turse, author of the highly praised *Next Time They'll Come to Count the Dead*, points out today in his latest report on the U.S. military's pivot to Africa, the pattern is only intensifying, something clearly recognized by key American commanders. What's strange, however, is that none of this seems to have caused anyone in the national security state or the military to reconsider the last 15 years of military-first policies, of bombs dropped, troops dispatched, drones sent in, and what the results were across the Greater Middle East and now Africa. There is no serious recalibration, no real rethinking. The response to 15 years of striking failure in a vast region remains more of the same. State of failure indeed! ~ *Tom*

**Breaking the Camouflage Wall of Silence  
When AFRICOM Evaluates Itself, the News Is Grim  
By Nick Turse**

It's rare to hear one top military commander publicly badmouth another, call attention to his faults, or simply point out his shortcomings. Despite a seemingly endless supply of debacles from strategic setbacks to quagmire conflicts since 9/11, the top brass rarely criticize each other or, even in retirement, utter a word about the failings of their predecessors or successors. Think of it as the camouflage wall of silence. You may loathe him. You may badmouth him behind closed doors. You may have secretly hoped for his career to implode. But publicly point out failures? That's left to those further down the chain of command.

And yet that's effectively exactly what newly installed U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) chief, General Thomas Waldhauser, did earlier this year in a statement to the Senate Arms Services Committee (SASC). It's just that no one, almost certainly including Waldhauser himself, seemed to notice or recognize it for the criticism it was, including the people tasked with oversight of military operations and those in the media.

Over these last years, the number of personnel, missions, dollars spent, and special ops training efforts as well as drone bases and other outposts on the continent have all multiplied. At the same time, incoming AFRICOM commanders have been publicly warning about the escalating perils and challenges from terror groups that menace the command's area of operations. Almost no one, however – neither those senators nor the media – has raised pointed questions, no less demanded frank answers, about why such crises on the continent have so perfectly mirrored American military expansion.

Asked earlier this year about the difficulties he'd face if confirmed, Waldhauser was blunt: "A major challenge is effectively countering violent extremist organizations, especially the growth

of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and ISIL in Libya.”

That should have been a *déjà vu* moment for some of those senators. Three years earlier, the man previously nominated to lead AFRICOM, General David Rodriguez, was asked the same question. His reply was suspiciously similar: “A major challenge is effectively countering violent extremist organizations, especially the growth of Mali as an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb safe haven, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and al-Shabaab in Somalia.”

All that had changed between 2013 and 2016, it seemed, was the addition of one more significant threat.

In the midst of Rodriguez’s 2016 victory lap (as he was concluding 40 years of military service), Waldhauser publicly drew attention to just how ineffective his run as AFRICOM chief had been. Some might call it unkind – a slap in the face for a decorated old soldier – but perhaps turnabout is fair play. After all, in 2013, Rodriguez did much the same to his predecessor, General Carter Ham, when he offered *his* warning about the challenges on the continent.

Three years before that, in 2010, Ham appeared before the same committee and said, “I believe that the extremist threat that’s emerging from East Africa is probably the greatest concern that Africa Command will face in the near future.” Ham expressed no worry about threats posed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or Boko Haram. ISIL in Libya didn’t even exist. And even that “greatest concern,” al-Shabaab, was, Ham noted, “primarily focused on internal matters in Somalia.”

In other words, over these last years, each incoming AFRICOM commander has offered a more dismal and dire assessment of the situation facing the U.S. military than his predecessor. Ham drew attention to only one major terror threat, Rodriguez to three, and Waldhauser to four.

### **His Own Worst Critic**

That said, Waldhauser isn’t the only AFRICOM chief to point a finger at Rodriguez’s checkered record. Another American general cast an even darker shadow on the outgoing commander’s three-year run overseeing Washington’s shadow war in Africa:

“AFRICOM’s priorities on the continent for the next several years will be... in East Africa to improve stability there. Most of that is built around the threat of al-Shabaab. And then, in the North and West Africa is really built around the challenges from Libya down to northern Mali and that region and that instability there creates many challenges... And then after that is the West Africa, really about the Boko Haram and the problem in Nigeria that is, unfortunately, crossing the boundary into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. So those are the big challenges and then just the normal ones that continue to be a challenge are the Gulf of Guinea... as well as countering the Lord’s Resistance Army...”

That *critic* was, in fact, General David Rodriguez himself in an AFRICOM promotional video released on multiple social media platforms last month. It was posted on the very day that his

command also touted its “more than 30 major exercises and more than 1,000 military to military engagements” between 2013 and 2015. It was hardly a surprise, however, that these two posts and the obvious conclusion to be drawn from them – just how little AFRICOM’s growing set of ambitious continent-wide activities mattered when it came to the spread of terror movements – went unattended and uncommented upon.

Waldhauser and Rodriguez have not, however, been alone in pointing out increased insecurity on the continent. “Terrorism and violent extremism are major sources of instability in Africa,” Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield of the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in May. “Terrorist organizations such as al-Shabaab, Boko Haram (which now calls itself the Islamic State in West Africa), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Murabitoun are conducting asymmetric campaigns that cause significant loss of innocent life and create potentially long-term humanitarian crises.”

National intelligence director James Clapper, who called the continent “a hothouse for the emergence of extremist and rebel groups” in 2014, spoke of the dangers posed by the Lord’s Resistance Army and al-Shabaab, as well as terror threats in Egypt, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and Tunisia, and instability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of Congo, Burundi, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan before the Senate Armed Services Committee earlier this year.

And then there’s Brigadier General Donald Bolduc who heads Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA), the most elite U.S. troops on the continent. He painted a picture that was grimmer still. Last November, during a closed door presentation at the annual Special Operations Command Africa Commander’s Conference in Garmisch, Germany, the SOCAFRICA chief drew attention not just to the threats of al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram, ISIL, and the Lord’s Resistance Army, but also another “43 malign groups” operating in Africa, according to another set of documents obtained via the Freedom of Information Act.

The growth of terror groups from the one named by Ham in 2010 to the 48 mentioned by Bolduc in 2015 is as remarkable as it has been unremarked upon, a record so bleak that it demands a congressional investigation that will, of course, never take place.

### **Questions Unasked, Questions Unanswered**

U.S. Africa Command boasts that it “neutralizes transnational threats” and “prevents and mitigates conflict,” while training local allies and proxies “in order to promote regional security, stability, and prosperity.” Rodriguez’s tenure was, however, marked by the very opposite: increasing numbers of lethal terror attacks across the continent including those in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Tunisia. In fact, data from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland shows that attacks have spiked over the last decade, roughly coinciding with AFRICOM’s establishment. In 2007, just before it became an independent command, there were fewer than 400 such incidents annually in sub-Saharan Africa. Last year, the number reached nearly 2,000.

While these statistics may be damning, they are no more so than the words of AFRICOM's own chiefs. Yet the senators who are supposed to provide oversight haven't seemed to bat an eye, let alone ask the obvious questions about why terror groups and terror attacks are proliferating as U.S. operations, bases, manpower, and engagement across the continent grow. (Note that this is, of course, the same Senate committee that Rodriguez misled, whether purposefully or inadvertently, earlier this year when it came to the number of U.S. military missions in Africa without – again – either apparent notice or any repercussions.)

In an era of too-big-to fail generals, an age in which top commanders from winless wars retire to take prominent posts at influential institutions and cash in with cushy jobs on corporate boards, AFRICOM chiefs have faced neither hard questions nor repercussions for the deteriorating situation. (Similar records – heavy on setbacks, short on victories – have been produced by Washington's war chiefs in Afghanistan and Iraq for the past 15 years and they, too, have never led to official calls for any sort of accountability.)

Rodriguez is now planning on resting at his northern Virginia home for a few months and, as he told *Stars and Stripes*, seeing “what comes next.”

U.S. Africa Command failed to respond to multiple requests for an interview with Rodriguez, but if he follows in the footsteps of the marquee names among fellow retired four-stars of his generation, like David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, he'll supplement his six-figure pension with one or more lucrative private sector posts.

What comes next for AFRICOM will play out on the continent and in briefings before the Senate Armed Services Committee for years to come. If history is any guide, the number of terror groups on the continent will not decrease, the senators will fail to ask why this is so, and the media will follow their lead.

During his final days in command, AFRICOM released several more short videos of Rodriguez holding forth on various issues. In one of the last of these, the old soldier praised “the whole team” for accomplishing “a tremendous amount over the last several years.” What exactly that was went unsaid, though it certainly wasn't achieving AFRICOM's mandate to “neutraliz[e] transnational threats.” But what Rodriguez said next made a lot of sense. He noted that AFRICOM wasn't alone in it – whatever it was. Washington, D.C., he said, had played a key role, too. In that, he couldn't have been more on target. The increasingly bleak outlook in Africa can't simply be laid at the feet of AFRICOM's commanders. Again and again, they've been upfront about the deteriorating situation. Washington has just preferred to look the other way.