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The Political Rhetoric of Perpetual War

By Robert Crawford
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I want to start with a quick overview of our present situation. Most of you are familiar with this recent history; yet, it bears repeating. For 15 years now, since 2001, the US has been at war.

The longest single battlefield has been the war in Afghanistan and in neighboring Pakistan Tribal Areas. It has spanned two administrations. The Taliban remains undefeated and is gaining ground and war lords pursue their own political and military agendas.

The 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, now almost universally acknowledged to be one of the greatest military mistakes in recent times, has virtually destroyed a country that had been created by the imperial powers during WWI. Warfare between a Shia dominated Iraqi government and the Sunnis—now mostly controlled by ISIS—has become a struggle for territory and cities. This war has been internationalized.

The Syrian civil war, which has become another international war, continues its rising death toll and propels the greatest refugee crisis since WWII.

The U.S., British and French air war on Gadhafi's Libya in 2011 has resulted in another failed state, ongoing civil war, and more U.S. and allied bombing.

Insurgencies in Yemen, Somalia, northern Nigeria, along with military attempts to suppress them continue to cause huge numbers of civilian casualties and further displacement. These conflicts have also been internationalized.

Since 2006, the Israeli siege of Gaza and the essentially one-sided warfare against Hamas, culminating in the brutal assault of 2014, has caused extraordinary suffering. The government-backed settler land grab in the West Bank makes the prospects of a just peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians more remote. In all these wars, civilians are the primary victims.

As you know, the US is neck deep in this descent into perpetual and proliferating warfare. Historian Andrew Bacevich calls it America's WWIV. Despite repeated military failures and negative unanticipated consequences, the US still pursues the illusion that it can shape the contemporary Middle East through a combination of drone warfare, bombing, Special Operations and other covert actions. It continues to invest heavily in the militaries of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and other U.S. allies.

American military dominance (which must be distinguished from effectiveness) is the most fundamental fact of today's international order. The U.S., after all, maintains a projection of global power with hundreds of thousands troops stationed abroad" who occupy or use "some 761 'sites' in 39 countries"—what critic Chalmers Johnson called "an empire of bases."

Anyone with eyes wide open must come to this topic with more questions than answers—to say nothing about the burden of grief and even despair that many of us carry. I continue to struggle with both the questions and the difficult emotions.

For those of us hoping for a more peaceful world and a more peaceful American foreign policy, the core political question—what is to be done?—is perplexing. As long as American soldiers are not dying in significant numbers, Americans, for the most part, seem uninterested—and certainly uniformed—about US wars and their consequences. The corporate controlled media are no help; instead, they do everything possible to hinder understanding and serious debate. Historical amnesia is a particularly American affliction. Each of these obstacles are serious problems we need to confront.

My topic, here, is the political rhetoric of the 2016 presidential election. Even though it is a small part of the puzzle, the rhetoric of the presidential candidates reveals a great deal about the historical moment and the larger forces that shape this nation's perpetual wars.

My first contention is that there is an ideology of militarism that dominates our political culture and it is being perpetuated by both the Democratic and Republican nominees for president, despite their significant differences.

We know or should know how militarist ideology exploits our fears of terrorism, and perpetuates the illusion that our safety depends on the worldwide projection and use of military power.

We know or should know that this ideology was developed and honed throughout the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the national security establishment had to find a new enemy to justify its continued rule.

We know or should know that militarism is an ideology that denies its own contributions to the continual escalation of violence in the Middle East and to terrorist attacks in the West.

We know or should know that militarism is an ideology that defines problems in such a way to fit preexisting solutions—the proverbial hammer that turns all problems into nails, foreclosing serious discussion of alternatives before they can begin.

My second contention is that this general understanding is not enough if we ever hope to dismantle the ideology of militarism. I believe that the progress of peace activism depends on our ability to dismantle the discourse of militarism—the public statements of national security officials, experts, politicians, and media workers—words that form the building blocks of the ideology, words that foreclose thoughtfulness and debate about the realities and the consequences of war.

We must be able to confront the ideology's essential assumptions, often hidden in a turn of a phrase and mindlessly repeated. This is why I focus on language and discourse. It matters what is said by our political leaders, picked up by the media, and then disseminated throughout the country.

The rhetoric employed by candidates is important not only because it shapes public understandings. Aspirants for office draw on and know how to exploit a deep well of almost automatic responses by a public steeped in a culture that has come to see military power as the foundation for national strength and stature.

There is much to say about this war culture—its centuries-long belief in the salvational quality of violence, the belief that the sacredness of the nation is best expressed through war and victory over adversaries, and a willingness to use whatever means necessary to protect the nation. For politicians, this willingness is a test that cannot be failed. The war culture demands “strong” leaders.

Moreover, politicians who aspire to the highest office of the most powerful nation with the world's strongest military have likely *already* acquired the ideological prerequisites for the job. The ambition to become commander-in-chief entails a recognition that there is an elaborate, institutionalized power structure within which they must maneuver. A president may have some latitude vis-à-vis the generals and secret branches, but a president must acquiesce to both the substantive content of what can be said and done along with the boundaries one cannot cross. There is a, after all, a “national security consensus” as powerful as any weapon.

Thus, when we hear the words of a candidate for president or read the quotes we need to ask: who speaks? Are the words the genuinely thought through positions of an individual candidate who promises to shape policy to his or her own presidential will OR might they be an expression of something larger?—on the one side a war culture infatuated with military power and on the other a confluence of forces that act with little or no transparency, what some have called the “deep state,” accountable to no electorate nor even the president.

Political analysis must recognize that the autonomy of presidents is limited. There are larger forces and influences at work. If a candidate or even a president violates the rules of the game, he or she does so at his or her political or personal peril. Donald Trump may be a contemporary example. As we will see, many national security elites, people who would normally support a Republican candidate, have openly criticized his campaign and support his Democratic opponent.

I am suggesting that in matters of war and peace, there will be no deliverance by a president, even one who genuinely wants to move the US to a more peaceful foreign policy. Please note that I'm not saying that it doesn't matter who is elected in November. I think it does matter; and I hope the analysis I offer here informs your choice. My point is that the language employed by the candidates for president tells us something important about the larger challenge we face—the ideological hegemony we must pierce if we are ever to build a lasting culture of peace. With this in mind, let's turn to Clinton and Trump's National Security rhetoric.

An Analysis of Trump and Clinton's Rhetoric on National Security

For Donald Trump, I will discuss just two critical positions: his “America First” rhetoric; and his promise to vastly expand the military.

Trump has said “America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration.” My focus will be on Trump's assertion that national self-interest will be his principal guide for making decisions about the use of military force. He claims that he would not be guided by vague moral aims, by international obligations, or alliances.

Trump's bald assertions of self-interest, an America Unchained version of national security, would make even Henry Kissinger blush. Speaking of the Iraq War, he said that even though the war was a mistake, since the US won the war, we should “take the oil.” After all, “to the victor belong the spoils.” [NBC Forum, 9/7/16] No matter that plunder is a violation of the Geneva Conventions; Rudolf Giuliani caught the underlying meaning of Trump's remark when he followed up with, “Of course it's legal. It's war. Until the war is over, anything is legal.” Last

spring, Trump also threatened to withdraw American protection from allies who don't pay their full share of military expenditures, a pronouncement that sent tremors through both allies and the US national security elite. Even the neo-cons who in the 1990s touted America's "unilateral moment" and who called for a benign American Imperium were more cautious in their public pronouncements. For Trump: no more "regime change in the name of democratizing the Middle East ("a dangerous idea"); no more "nation building" as well—a waste of money. Not least, if a brutal dictator helps stabilize a country or a region, let him be. Exhibit A: Saddam Hussein. Exhibit B: Egypt's Mubarak; and Exhibit C: Libya's Gadhafi. (Of course, the record shows that at the time Trump took opposite positions on all three.)

Trump's criticisms of recent wars as catastrophic along with his America First pronouncements have led some commentators to suggest that he will return America to isolationism. It is true that Trump has declared that he will keep us out of useless and harmful wars. Here is his statement from last April: "I will never send our finest into battle unless necessary, and I mean absolutely necessary, and will only do so if we have a plan for victory with a capital V." "War and aggression," he said, "will not be my first instinct."

There are several things, however, that throw doubt on Trump's claim to keep us out of wars. First, note the bellicose language of his statement—"a plan for victory with a capital V." From this statement alone, one must conclude that if a Trump Administration takes the US into war, he would hold back nothing. The full force of the military would be unleashed upon the enemy.

Trump has also asserted that when he draws a "line in the sand," unlike Obama in Syria, he will enforce it. Here, Trump is not unlike all the tough talking generals and political leaders who are always concerned with maintaining "credibility" or the "deterrence value" of threatening the use of force, the need to demonstrate that you mean what you say. At a recent meeting of Republicans in Nashville, Trump said, "I'm much more militaristic than Bush, or even the brother, but you have to know where to use it and when."

In fact, Trump has been very explicit about where to use military force and when: As a first priority of his presidency, Trump says he will implement a "secret plan" to "defeat and destroy" ISIS. He won't reveal the details of his plan but he does say that it will entail "a method of defeating them quickly and effectively and having total victory." Note again the rhetoric of total warfare—a rhetoric further revealed last December when Trump, speaking about how he would fight a war against terrorists, said "you have to take out their families."

Trump's comment about "taking out their families" raises a final point that must be said about Trump's America First rhetoric. Trump is employing rhetoric that if carried out would constitute war crimes.

I provide just one more example, an example important to all of us who have worked so hard to end US torture. "Would I bring back waterboarding? You bet your ass I would. . . . It works. And even if it doesn't work they deserve it anyway for what they do to us." This was said in early March at a Republican primary debate.

These comments generated a firestorm of criticism from top military, CIA, and other national security elites, especially after his earlier remarks about purposively targeting civilians. Some even threatened that they would disobey such orders. Trump quickly reversed himself, saying he understands that the US “is bound by laws and treaties.” He added that “I will not order our military or other officials to violate those laws and will seek their advice on such matters.” Did Trump have a rare moment of insight?—a belated recognition that there is a deep state? It would take me too much time to lay out the reasons why the national security apparatus would have so much trouble with such talk, but the rebuke was clear.

The media gave full coverage to this reversal; but when Trump once again returned to the possible use of waterboarding in June, saying that he liked it and it wasn’t “tough enough,” and that he thinks the law should be loosened, there was hardly any media coverage. Thus, his words hang out there, with their “whatever it takes” implications. Trump’s language is symbolic of a leader willing to go any length in war. The dangerous implication of this kind of talk, as independent journalist Mark Danner points out, is that in the endless war on terrorism, “it is impossible to protect the country while also following the law.” This is the very essence of the state of exception in which we find ourselves—that twilight zone between law and raw exertion of power

Finally, in this context, I want to note that no candidate has said anything about the United States continued refusal to join the International Criminal Court. As political theorist Paul Kahn has argued, “The jurisdiction of the Court has become the site for a symbolic battle between law and politics for the US, a nation that believes that politics has priority over law.”

In sum, Trump’s America First rhetoric in relation to war reveals an inclination toward unrestrained violence when he believes it is in the interest of the United States to exercise it. In fact, he promises just such a war against ISIS. Isolationism? Hardly.

I also want to discuss Trump’s call for what he says will be a “vast expansion of the military,” “including 90,000 new soldiers for the Army and nearly 75 new ships for the Navy, requiring up to \$90 billion a year in additional spending.” This is important for Trump because, “strength” is a key theme of his campaign. He claims that Obama and Clinton have made America “weak,” so much so that America is a “second rate power.” He also claims that the military build-up will give the US such overwhelming strength that it will prevent our getting into more wars: “We want to deter, avoid and prevent conflict through our unquestioned military strength,” Trump declared.

I have a few observations about this pledge for expanding the military:

We should remember that the US already spends more on its military than the next seven countries combined. There is much to say about the distortion of humane and just priorities caused by the bloated Pentagon and now a vast domestic Homeland Security apparatus. Here I simply quote a famous American: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of

life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” The quote is from President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953.

Trump’s equation of national strength with the size and capabilities of its military, including its nuclear arsenal, is nothing new—and has been used by both parties. Unquestioned military superiority has been a cornerstone of US policy since WWII, and then continued even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Any attempt to reign in military spending is likely to be met with a barrage of charges of weakening America.

Finally, although Clinton has not made the claim, most observers believe she will increase military spending. The “Military and Defense” section of her campaign website leads with “We should maintain the best-trained, best-equipped, and strongest military the world has ever known”—a standard, minimal commitment from any presidential candidate over the last 70 years.

I would like now to turn to Hillary Clinton. I will discuss three themes:

America Exceptionalism; Fighting ISIS; and Israel-Palestine.

First is the idea that “The United States is an exceptional nation,” In late August, in an appearance before the American Legion’s national convention, Clinton said the following: “It’s not just that we have the greatest military, or that our economy is larger than any on Earth, it’s also the strength of our values.” Clinton added: “Our power comes with a responsibility to lead.” In a June 2nd speech on national security, Clinton said “I believe with all my heart that America is an exceptional country, that we’re still, in Lincoln’s words, the last, best hope of earth. . . . We lead with purpose, and we prevail.” Clinton then warned what would happen in the absence of US power: “And if America doesn’t lead, we leave a vacuum – and that will either cause chaos, or other countries will rush in to fill the void. Then they’ll be the ones making the decisions about your lives and jobs and safety – and trust me, the choices they make will not be to our benefit.”

In such pronouncements Clinton is much like every preceding president, along with every other member of the national security elite, including the corporate media. America is the indispensable nation—a force for good in the world, defending values that are claimed to be universal. We not only lead by example, we lead by the principled exercise of military power. We are a benign superpower, with a singular responsibility for maintaining what is called “the international order.” If the US doesn’t lead, there will be a “void,” and our adversaries will fill that void. Perhaps American values—translated into interests—are not so universal after all.

Critics point out that American Exceptionalism is the ideological foundation that has led to a glib public acceptance of global military domination, along with a stubborn refusal to take seriously the abundance of contrary evidence that demonstrates that our actions repeatedly violate the principles our leaders profess. This do-no-wrong missionary zeal has long been a staple of American national identity and an essential component of America’s war culture.

Thus, American Exceptionalism is no small thing for peace activists who hope to break through the blinders about American military power that most Americans wear. Given that humanitarian intervention is the latest version of this ideology, the so-called Responsibility to Protect, we can expect American Exceptionalism to be a bedrock of a Clinton presidency. Remember that humanitarian intervention was supposedly what the overthrow of Gadhafi was all about—an intervention for which Clinton pushed hard.

The second theme I want to discuss is Clinton's pledge to "defeat" ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. Clinton's language has been consistent. Like Trump, she has a war plan, although unlike Trump she is willing to spell out its parameters: "We have to have an American-led air campaign, we have to have Arab and Kurdish troops on the ground. We have got to go after everything from North Africa to South Asia and beyond." [NH primary debate, 12/19/15] Once again, Clinton asserts America's global responsibility to lead what she, like so many others in the national security establishment, calls a "generational struggle."

Listen to her words: "This is a time for American leadership. No other country can rally the world to defeat ISIS and win the generational struggle against radical jihadism. Only the United States can mobilize common action on a global scale, and that's exactly what we need. The entire world must be part of this fight, but we must lead it." [Speech on Fighting ISIS, 11/19/15 to the Council on Foreign Relations] She gets more explicit: "It's time to begin a new phase and intensify and broaden our efforts to smash the would-be caliphate and deny ISIS control of territory in Iraq and Syria. That starts with a more effective coalition air campaign; with more allied planes, more strikes, and a broader target set." "And," Clinton added, "we should be honest about the fact that to be successful, air strikes will have to be combined with ground forces actually taking back more territory from ISIS."

Of course, Clinton has also proclaimed that there will be no American ground forces involved, glossing over the fact that American Special Operations forces are currently active in both Syria and Iraq—a glossing that recalls the subterfuge of U.S. "advisors" that was used in the build up to the Vietnam War. Need I point out that neither Clinton nor anyone else has expressed one iota of shame that in place of Americans it is Muslim soldiers who are dying in great numbers in the wars of the Greater Middle East.

In sum, Clinton as well as Trump, not to mention the sitting president, employ the language of defeating and destroying ISIS. This is the language of war—and we can expect nothing but war from Clinton or Trump. The assumption on which this is based was stated clearly by Obama when he said "The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force."

My last topic regarding Clinton is Israel-Palestine. Here, I will mostly summarize positions rather than elaborating with quotations. Clinton is known to be a strong supporter of Israel. Her positions over time have become entirely one-sided and uncritical. In recent years, she has:

+ Defended Israel's right to build the separation barrier that takes a path deep into the West Bank, an action that has been ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice, which Clinton completely ignores;

- + Advocated moving the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which she described as “the eternal and indivisible capital of Israel,” knowing full well how provocative such a claim is for the Palestinians.
- + Threatened to cut off US aid to the Palestinian Authority if it unilaterally declared a Palestinian state;
- + Abandoned a former US position that a halt in Jewish settlements in the West Bank is a pre-condition to peace talks, even arguing that it would be counter-productive;
- + Attacked the BDS movement as Anti-Semitic, an attempt to “malign, isolate and undermine Israel and the Jewish people;” Clinton’s statements helped defeat a United Methodist Church divestment resolution this past May pertaining to three companies that contribute to the occupation of the West Bank;
- + With strong backing from Clinton, the Democratic platform committee adopted language that neither referenced Israel’s occupation nor expressed opposition to continued settlement building—this, despite a vigorous challenge from Sanders delegates;
- + Put the entire onus of blame on Hamas for the 2014 Israeli assault on Gaza: “Hamas provoked Israel in order to actually cause what we are now seeing.”
- + Regarding Iran’s supposed nuclear weapons program, Clinton touted her tough-sanctions hard-ball diplomacy that prevented war; yet, she also asserted that if Iran violates the agreement, the US “will act to stop it, and that we will do so with force if necessary.” Interestingly, she spoke these words in her speech to AIPAC. She has also warned that if Iran continues to threaten Israel through its funding of Hezbollah and Hamas, it will face a tough response, not only from Israel, but from the US as well.

If Israel is to survive as a democracy—which means a country that upholds the values of human dignity and refuge from religious and racist hatreds of the European Diaspora—then there must be a just solution for the Palestinians. As Israel moves more and more to the Right, including an unabashed racism toward the Palestinians, state-sponsored settler colonialism in the West Bank, and repeated punitive wars and a continuing siege of Gaza, the uncritical support given by both Clinton and Trump amount to an endorsement of these tragic developments. Only a more balanced approach from the United States promises any hope for peace between Israel and Palestine.

In conclusion, I hope my research into the campaign rhetoric of Trump and Clinton has been helpful. This has not been a feel-good talk. We live in dangerous times—Americans in terms of the future of the republic; people in the Greater Middle East in terms of suffering the consequences of perpetual war. You may disagree with what I have said here but we should at least be talking and debating these serious matters.

Here is what I have learned:

First, the key differences between Trump and Clinton can be quickly summarized: Clinton is committed to the ideology of American Exceptionalism; Trump is hoping to win over the nationalist, whatever-it-takes, and xenophobic sector of the electorate; he wants to rip off this mask of justification which has been the ideological foundation of the national security state and put in its place the justification of “what’s in it for us.” For this alone, the national security establishment are fearful of his becoming president.

Even more important, unlike Clinton, Trump’s entire candidacy is a call to war. Here I must add a few points not previously discussed: Trump promises war against radical Islam; war against the Islamic immigrant “cancer from within;” which will be rooted out by “extreme vetting” and racial profiling; war against “illegal aliens” who will be deported in mass; war against undocumented migrants who will be stopped by a wall on our southern border; war on citizens through militarized policing; war on due process and the rule of law through military detention of accused terrorists; war against anyone who dares to advocate for reasonable controls on guns through promoting a climate of violence; war, in short, that erases the already frayed boundary between war in the Middle East and war in the Middle West. Trump’s pledge to create a fortress America will likely end in an America at war with itself.

Second, both candidates for the highest office of the most powerful and active military in the world have embraced the proposition that ISIS poses a grave and imminent threat to the US and they have pledged to “defeat and destroy” it. Once again, war is the solution. They thus confirm and promise to intensify what already is a reality—the US has been at war with ISIS for some time, along with warring with other Islamic Jihadist movements.

What are the likely consequences? First and foremost, there will be enormous civilian casualties in the areas now controlled by ISIS, especially cities like Mosul. There will also be enormous combatant casualties. Moreover, Clinton’s pledge to “take out” al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, will mean a continuing reliance on and celebration of drone warfare. Targeted assassinations, the myths that sustain them, and the blowback consequences that inevitably follow drone strikes will continue to be a leading feature of US warfare.

Not least, ISIS will certainly continue and increase its attacks on so called soft targets in the West. This, in turn, will reinforce a further escalation of violence exercised in retaliation and in the mistaken belief that we can exterminate the threat through bombs. This is the recipe for a “forever war” with ISIS or with its next incarnation.

Finally, the consensus between the candidates extends beyond ISIS; it includes uncritical support of an alliance with Israel’s ever-more extreme land grab in the West Bank and the ongoing siege and repeated decimation of Hamas-controlled Gaza. It means continued alliances with dictators and repressive regimes that are ruthless against internal dissenters and that wage war with the US or engage in proxy wars on their own, with US support. It means ensuring the strongest possible military at a strength that far exceeds any other country. It means, in short, that the military will continue to be an instrument of policy rather than the mythical “last resort.” My fear is that it will mean a continuation of perpetual war.

Martin Luther King, in his extraordinary speech of April, 1967, on the Vietnam War, quoted a Vietnamese Buddhist leader: “Each day the war goes on the hatred increases in the hearts of the Vietnamese and in the hearts of those of humanitarian instinct;” that “Americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies;” and that “Americans who calculate so carefully on the possibilities of military victory, do not realize that in the process they are incurring deep psychological and political defeat.” “The image of America,” he warned, “will never again be the image of revolution, freedom and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism.”

I would be perfectly happy to respond to your questions, need for clarifications, or disagreements with my analysis. I know that I have addressed only a small part of the problem of militarism. I also invite you to discuss your own understandings, what you think is important to do, both personally and collectively, at this point in our history.

After all, the purpose of any political analysis is to point to the enduring question—how do we respond? What is to be done? As peace activists, we continually ask what actions, what arguments, what kinds of witness or protest might help shift the public mood about particular U.S. wars and what might move people to a better understanding of the terrible consequences and incredible dangers associated with the reliance on force or threat of force as the leading component of American foreign policy.