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The Imperial Unconscious

by Tom Engelhardt

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Sometimes, it's the everyday things, the ones that fly below the radar, that matter.

Here, according to Bloomberg News, is [part of](#) Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' recent testimony on the Afghan War before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

*"U.S. goals in Afghanistan must be 'modest, realistic,' and 'above all, **there must be an Afghan face on this war,**' Gates said. 'The Afghan people must believe this is their war and we are there to help them. If they think we are there for our own purposes, then we will go the way of every other foreign army that has been in Afghanistan.'"*

Now, in our world, a statement like this seems so obvious, so reasonable as to be beyond comment. And yet, stop a moment and think about this part of it: "there must be an Afghan face on this war." U.S. military and civilian officials used an equivalent phrase in 2005-2006 when things were going really, really wrong in Iraq. It was then commonplace – and no less unremarked upon – for them to urgently [suggest](#) that an "Iraqi face" be put on events there.

Evidently back in vogue for a different war, the phrase is revelatory – and oddly blunt. As an image, there's really only one way to understand it (not that anyone here stops to do so). After all, what does it mean to "put a face" on something that assumedly already has a face? In this case, it has to mean putting an Afghan *mask* over what we know to be the actual "face" of the

Afghan War – ours – a foreign face that men like Gates recognize, quite correctly, is not the one most Afghans want to see. It's hardly surprising that the secretary of defense would pick up such a phrase, part of Washington's everyday arsenal of words and images when it comes to geopolitics, power, and war.

And yet, make no mistake, this is Empire-speak, American-style. It's the language – behind which lies a deeper structure of argument and thought – that is essential to Washington's vision of itself as a planet-straddling Goliath. Think of that "Afghan face"/mask, in fact, as part of the flotsam and jetsam that regularly bubbles up from the American imperial unconscious.

Of course, words create realities even though such language, in all its strangeness, essentially passes unnoticed here. Largely uncommented upon, it helps normalize American practices in the world, comfortably shielding us from certain global realities; but it also has the potential to blind us to those realities, which, in perilous times, can be dangerous indeed. So let's consider just a few entries in what might be thought of as *The Dictionary of American Empire-Speak*.

War Hidden in Plain Sight: There has recently been much reporting on, and [even some debate here about](#), the efficacy of the Obama administration's decision to increase the intensity of [CIA missile attacks](#) from drone aircraft in what Washington, in a newly coined neologism reflecting a widening war, now calls "Af-Pak" – the Pashtun tribal borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since August 2008, [more than 30](#) such missile attacks have been launched on the Pakistani side of that border against suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban targets. The pace of attacks has actually [risen](#) since Barack Obama entered the Oval Office, as have casualties from the missile strikes, as well as [popular outrage](#) in Pakistan over the attacks.

[Thanks to](#) Sen. Diane Feinstein, we also know that, despite strong official Pakistani government protests, someone official in that country is doing more than looking the other way while they occur. As the senator revealed recently, at least some of the CIA's unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) cruising the skies over Af-Pak are evidently stationed at Pakistani bases. We learned recently as well that American Special Operations units are now [regularly making forays](#) inside Pakistan "primarily to gather intelligence"; that a [unit](#) of 70 American Special Forces advisers, a "secret task force, overseen by the United States Central Command and Special Operations Command," is now aiding and training Pakistani Army and Frontier Corps paramilitary troops, again inside Pakistan; and that, despite (or perhaps, in part, because of) these American efforts, the influence of the Pakistani Taliban is [actually expanding](#), even as Pakistan threatens to melt down.

Mystifyingly enough, however, this Pakistani part of the American war in Afghanistan is still referred to in major U.S. papers as a "covert war." As news about it pours out, who it's being hidden from is one of those questions no one bothers to ask.

On Feb. 20, the *New York Times*' Mark Mazzetti and David E. Sanger [typically wrote](#):

"With two missile strikes over the past week, the Obama administration has expanded the covert war run by the Central Intelligence Agency inside Pakistan, attacking a militant network seeking to topple the Pakistani government. ... Under standard policy for covert operations, the CIA

strikes inside Pakistan have not been publicly acknowledged either by the Obama administration or the Bush administration."

On Feb. 25, Mazzetti and Helene Cooper [reported](#) that new CIA head Leon Panetta essentially bragged to reporters that "the agency's campaign against militants in Pakistan's tribal areas was the 'most effective weapon' the Obama administration had to combat al-Qaeda's top leadership. ... Mr. Panetta stopped short of directly acknowledging the missile strikes, but he said that 'operational efforts' focusing on Qaeda leaders had been successful." Siobhan Gorman of the *Wall Street Journal* reported the next day that Panetta said the attacks are "probably the most effective weapon we have to try to disrupt al-Qaeda right now." She added, "Mr. Obama and National Security Adviser James Jones have strongly endorsed their use, [Panetta] said."

Uh, covert war? These "covert" "operational efforts" have been front-page news in the Pakistani press for months, they were part of the U.S. presidential campaign debates, and they certainly can't be a secret for the Pashtuns in those border areas who must see drone aircraft overhead relatively regularly, or experience the missiles arriving in their neighborhoods.

In the U.S., "covert war" has long been a term for wars like the U.S.-backed Contra War against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in the 1980s, which were openly discussed, debated, and often lauded in this country. To a large extent, when aspects of these wars have actually been "covert" – that is, purposely hidden from anyone – it has been from the American public, not the enemies being warred upon. At the very least, however, such language, however threadbare, offers official Washington a kind of "plausible deniability" when it comes to thinking about what kind of an "American face" we present to the world.

Imperial Naming Practices: In our press, anonymous U.S. officials now point with pride to the increasing "precision" and "accuracy" of those drone missile attacks in taking out Taliban or al-Qaeda figures without (supposedly) taking out the tribespeople who live in the same villages or neighboring compounds. Such pieces lend our air war an almost sterile quality. They [tend to emphasize](#) the extraordinary lengths to which planners go to avoid "collateral damage." To many Americans, it must then seem strange, even irrational, that perfectly non-fundamentalist Pakistanis should be quite so outraged about attacks aimed at the world's worst terrorists.

On the other hand, consider for a moment the names of those drones now regularly in the skies over "[Pashtunistan](#)." These are no less regularly published in our press to no comment at all. The most basic of the armed drones goes by the name of [Predator](#), a moniker which might as well have come directly from those nightmarish sci-fi movies about an alien that feasts on humans. Undoubtedly, however, it was used in the way Col. Michael Steele of the 101st Airborne Division meant it when he exhorted his brigade deploying to Iraq (according to Thomas E. Ricks' new book, *The Gamble*) to remember: "You're the predator."

The Predator drone is armed with "only" two missiles. The more advanced drone, originally called [the Predator B](#), now being deployed to the skies over Af-Pak, has been dubbed the Reaper – as in the Grim Reaper. Now, there's only one thing such a "hunter-killer UAV" could be reaping, and you know just what that is: lives. It can be armed with [up to 14 missiles](#) (or four

missiles and two 500-pound bombs), which means it packs quite a deadly wallop.

Oh, by the way, those missiles are named as well. They're Hellfire missiles. So, if you want to consider the nature of this covert war in terms of names alone: Predators and Reapers are bringing down the fire from some satanic hell upon the peasants, fundamentalist guerrillas, and terrorists of the Af-Pak border regions.

In Washington, when the Af-Pak War is discussed, it's in the [bloodless](#), bureaucratic language of "global counterinsurgency" or "irregular warfare" (IW), of "soft power," "hard power," and "smart power." But flying over the Pashtun wildlands is the blunt-edged face of predation and death, ready at a moment's notice to deliver hellfire to those below.

Imperial Arguments: Let's pursue this just a little further. Faced with [rising numbers](#) of [civilian casualties](#) from U.S. and NATO air strikes in Afghanistan and an increasingly outraged Afghan public, American officials tend to place the blame for most sky-borne "collateral damage" squarely on the Taliban. As Joint Chiefs Chairman Michael Mullen [bluntly explained](#) recently, "[T]he enemy hides behind civilians." Hence, so this Empire-speak argument goes, dead civilians are actually the Taliban's doing.

U.S. military and civilian spokespeople have long accused Taliban guerrillas of using civilians as ["shields,"](#) or even of purposely luring [devastating](#) air strikes [down on](#) Afghan wedding parties to create civilian casualties and so inflame the sensibilities of rural Afghanistan. This commonplace argument has two key features: a claim that *they* made *us* do it (kill civilians) and the implication that the Taliban fighters "hiding" among innocent villagers or wedding revelers are so many cowards, willing to put their fellow Pashtuns at risk rather than come out and fight like men – and, of course, given the firepower arrayed against them, die.

The U.S. media regularly records this argument without reflecting on it. In this country, in fact, the evil of combatants "hiding" among civilians seems so self-evident, especially given the larger evil of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, that no one thinks twice about it.

And yet like so much of Empire-speak on a one-way planet, this argument is distinctly unidirectional. What's good for the guerrilla goose, so to speak, is inapplicable to the imperial gander. To illustrate, consider the American "pilots" flying those unmanned Predators and Reapers. We don't know exactly where all of them are (other than not in the drones), but some are certainly at [Nellis Air Force Base](#) just outside Las Vegas.

In other words, were the Taliban guerrillas to leave the protection of those civilians and come out into the open, there would be no enemy to fight in the usual sense, not even a predatory one. The pilot firing that Hellfire missile into some Pakistani border village or compound is, after all, using the UAV's cameras, including by next year a new system hair-raisingly dubbed "[Gorgon Stare](#)," to locate his target and then, via console, as in a single-shooter video game, firing the missile, possibly from many thousands of miles away.

And yet nowhere in our world will you find anyone making the argument that those pilots are in "hiding" like so many cowards. Such a thought seems absurd to us, as it would if it were applied

to the F-16 pilots taking off from [aircraft carriers](#) off the Afghan coast or the B-1 pilots [flying out of](#) unnamed Middle Eastern bases or the Indian Ocean island base of Diego Garcia. And yet, whatever those pilots may do in Afghan skies, unless they experience a mechanical malfunction, they are in no more danger than if they, too, were somewhere outside Las Vegas. In the last seven years, a few helicopters, but no planes, have gone down in Afghanistan.

When the Afghan *mujahedeen* fought the Soviets in the 1980s, the CIA supplied them with hand-held Stinger missiles, the most advanced surface-to-air missile in the U.S. arsenal, and they did indeed start knocking Soviet helicopters and planes out of the skies (which proved the beginning of the end for the Russians). The Afghan or Pakistani Taliban or al-Qaeda terrorists have no such capability today, which means, if you think about it, that what we here imagine as an "air war" involves none of the dangers we would normally associate with war. Looked at in another light, those missile strikes and bombings are really one-way acts of slaughter.

The Taliban's tactics are, of course, the essence of guerrilla warfare, which always involves an asymmetrical battle against more powerful armies and weaponry, and which, if successful, always depends on the ability of the guerrilla to blend into the environment, natural and human, or, as Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong so famously put it, to "swim" in the "sea of the people."

If you imagine your enemy simply using the villagers of Afghanistan as "shields" or "hiding" like so many cowards among them, you are speaking the language of imperial power but also blinding yourself (or the American public) to the actual realities of the war you're fighting.

Imperial Jokes: In October 2008, Rafael Correa, the president of Ecuador, refused to renew the U.S. lease at Manta Air Base, one of at least [761 foreign bases](#), macro to micro, that the U.S. garrisons worldwide. Correa [reportedly said](#): "We'll renew the base on one condition: that they let us put a base in Miami – an Ecuadorean base. If there's no problem having foreign soldiers on a country's soil, surely they'll let us have an Ecuadorean base in the United States."

This qualifies as an anti-imperial joke. The "leftist" president of Ecuador was doing no more than tweaking the nose of Goliath. An Ecuadorean base in Miami? Absurd. No one on the planet could take such a suggestion seriously.

On the other hand, when it comes to the U.S. having a major base in Kyrgyzstan, a Central Asian land that not one in a million Americans has ever heard of, that's no laughing matter. After all, Washington has been paying \$20 million a year in direct rent for the use of that country's Manas Air Base (and, as indirect rent, another \$80 million has gone to various Kyrgyzstani programs). As late as last October, the Pentagon was [planning](#) to sink another \$100 million into construction at Manas "to expand aircraft parking areas at the base and provide a 'hot cargo pad' – an area safe enough to load and unload hazardous and explosive cargo – to be located away from inhabited facilities." That, however, was when things started to go wrong. Now, Kyrgyzstan's parliament has voted to expel the U.S. from Manas within six months, a serious blow to our resupply efforts for the Afghan War. More outrageous yet to Washington, the Kyrgyzstanis seem to have done this at the bidding of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has the nerve to want to reestablish

a Russian sphere of influence in what used to be the borderlands of the old Soviet Union.

Put in a nutshell, despite the crumbling U.S. economic situation and the rising costs of the Afghan War, we still act as if we live on a one-way planet. Some country demanding a base in the U.S.? That's a joke or an insult, while the U.S. potentially gaining or losing a base almost anywhere on the planet may be an insult, but it's never a laughing matter.

Imperial Thought: Recently, to justify those missile attacks in Pakistan, U.S. officials have been leaking details on the program's "successes" to reporters. Anonymous officials have offered the "[possibly wishful estimate](#)" that the CIA "covert war" has led to the deaths (or capture) of 11 of al-Qaeda's top 20 commanders, including, according to a [recent Wall Street Journal report](#), "Abu Layth al-Libi, whom U.S. officials described as 'a rising star' in the group."

"Rising star" is such an American phrase, melding as it does imagined terror hierarchies with the lingo of celebrity tabloids. In fact, one problem with Empire-speak, and imperial thought more generally, is the way it prevents imperial officials from imagining a world not in their own image. So it's not surprising that, despite their best efforts, they regularly conjure up their enemies as a warped version of themselves – hierarchical, overly reliant on leaders, and top heavy.

In the Vietnam era, for instance, American officials spent a remarkable amount of effort sending troops to search for, and planes to bomb, the border sanctuaries of Cambodia and Laos on a fruitless hunt for COSVN (the so-called Central Office for South Vietnam), the supposed nerve center of the communist enemy, AKA "the bamboo Pentagon." Of course, it wasn't there to be found, except in Washington's imperial imagination.

In the Af-Pak "theater," we may be seeing a similar phenomenon. Underpinning the CIA killer-drone program is a belief that the key to combating al-Qaeda (and possibly the Taliban) is destroying its leadership one by one. As key Pakistani officials have tried to explain, the missile attacks, which have indeed killed some al-Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban figures (as well as whoever was in their vicinity), are distinctly counterproductive. The deaths of those figures in no way compensates for the outrage, the destabilization, the radicalization that the attacks engender in the region. They may, in fact, be functionally strengthening each of those movements.

What it's hard for Washington to grasp is this: "decapitation," to use another American imperial term, is not a particularly effective strategy with a decentralized guerrilla or terror organization. The fact is: a headless guerrilla movement is nowhere near as brainless or helpless as a headless Washington would be.

Only recently, Eric Schmitt and Jane Perlez of the *New York Times* [reported](#) that, while top U.S. officials were exhibiting optimism about the effectiveness of the missile strikes, Pakistani officials were pointing to "ominous signs of Al Qaeda's resilience" and suggesting "that al-Qaeda was replenishing killed fighters and mid-level leaders with less experienced but more hard-core militants, who are considered more dangerous because they have fewer allegiances to local Pakistani tribes. ... The Pakistani intelligence assessment found that al-Qaeda had adapted to the blows to its command structure by shifting 'to conduct decentralized operations under small but

well-organized regional groups' within Pakistan and Afghanistan."

Imperial Dreams and Nightmares: Americans have rarely liked to think of themselves as "imperial," so what is it about Rome in these last years? First, the neocons, in the flush of seeming victory in 2002-2003 began to imagine the U.S. as a "new Rome" (or new British Empire), or as Charles Krauthammer wrote as early as February 2001 in *Time* magazine, "America is no mere international citizen. It is the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome."

All roads on this planet, they were then convinced, led ineluctably to Washington. Now, of course, they visibly don't, and the imperial bragging about surpassing the Roman or British empires has long since faded away. When it comes to the Afghan War, in fact, those (resupply) "roads" [seem to lead](#), embarrassingly enough, through Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and Iran. But the comparison to conquering Rome evidently remains on the brain.

When, for instance, Joint Chiefs Chairman Mike Mullen wrote an [op-ed](#) for the *Washington Post* recently, drumming up support for the revised, age-of-Obama American mission in Afghanistan, he just couldn't help starting off with an inspiring tale about the Romans and a small Italian city-state, Locri, that they conquered. As he tells it, the ruler the Romans installed in Locri, a rapacious fellow named Pleminius, proved a looter and a tyrant. And yet, Mullen assures us, the Locrians so believed in "the reputation for equanimity and fairness that Rome had built" that they sent a delegation to the Roman Senate, knowing they could get a hearing, and demanded restitution; and indeed, the tyrant was removed.

Admittedly, this seems a far-fetched analogy to the U.S. in Afghanistan (and don't for a second mix up Pleminius, that rogue, with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, even though the Obama-ites evidently now believe him corrupt and replaceable). Still, as Mullen sees it, the point is: "We don't always get it right. But like the early Romans, we strive in the end to make it right. We strive to earn trust. And that makes all the difference."

Mullen is, it seems, the Aesop of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, in his somewhat overheated brain, we evidently remain the conquering (but just) "early" Romans – before, of course, the fatal rot set in.

And then there's the *Washington Post's* Thomas Ricks, a superb reporter who, in his latest book, gives voice to the views of CENTCOM Commander David Petraeus. Reflecting on Iraq, where he (like the general) believes we could still be fighting in 2015, Ricks [begins](#) a recent *Post* piece this way:

"In October 2008, as I was finishing my latest book on the Iraq war, I visited the Roman Forum during a stop in Italy. I sat on a stone wall on the south side of the Capitoline Hill and studied the two triumphal arches at either end of the Forum, both commemorating Roman wars in the Middle East. ... The structures brought home a sad realization: It's simply unrealistic to believe that the U.S. military will be able to pull out of the Middle East. ... It was a week when U.S. forces had engaged in combat in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan – a string of countries stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean – following in the footsteps of

Alexander the Great, the Romans, and the British."

With the waning of British power, Ricks continues, it "has been the United States' turn to take the lead there." And our turn, as it happens, just isn't over yet. Evidently that, at least, is the view from our imperial capital and from our military viceroys out on the peripheries.

Honestly, Freud would have loved these guys. They seem to channel the imperial unconscious. Take David Petraeus. For him, too, the duties and dangers of empire evidently weigh heavily on the brain. Like a number of key figures, civilian and military, he has lately begun to issue warnings about Afghanistan's dangers. As the *Washington Post* [reported](#), "[Petraeus] suggested that the odds of success were low, given that foreign military powers have historically met with defeat in Afghanistan. 'Afghanistan has been known over the years as the graveyard of empires,' he said. 'We cannot take that history lightly.'"

Of course, he's [worrying about](#) the graveyard aspect of this, but what I find curious – exactly because no one thinks it odd enough to comment on here – is the functional admission in the use of this old adage about Afghanistan that we fall into the category of empires, whether or not in search of a graveyard in which to die.

And he's not alone in this. Secretary of Defense Gates put the matter similarly recently: "Without the support of the Afghan people, Gates said, the U.S. would simply 'go the way of every other foreign army that's ever been in Afghanistan.'"

Imperial Blindness: Think of the above as just a few prospective entries in *The Dictionary of American Empire-Speak* that will, of course, never be compiled. We're so used to such language, so inured to it and to the thinking behind it, so used, in fact, to living on a one-way planet in which all roads lead to and from Washington, that it doesn't seem like a language at all. It's just part of the unexamined warp and woof of everyday life in a country that still believes it normal to garrison the planet, regularly fight wars halfway across the globe, find triumph or tragedy in the gain or loss of an air base in a country few Americans could locate on a map, and produce military manuals on counterinsurgency warfare the way a do-it-yourself furniture maker would produce instructions for constructing a cabinet from a kit.

We don't find it strange to have 16 intelligence agencies, some devoted to listening in on, and spying on, the planet, or capable of running "covert wars" in tribal borderlands thousands of miles distant, or of flying unmanned drones over those same borderlands destroying those who come into camera view. We're inured to the bizarreness of it all and of the language (and pretensions) that go with it.

If *The Dictionary of American Empire-Speak* were ever produced, who here would buy it? Who would feel the need to check out what seems like the only reasonable and self-evident language for describing the world? How else, after all, would we operate? How else would any American in a position of authority talk in Washington or Baghdad or Islamabad or Rome?

So it undoubtedly seemed to the Romans, too. And we know what finally happened to their empire and the language that went with it. Such a language plays its role in normalizing the

running of an empire. It allows officials (and in our case the media as well) not to see what would be inconvenient to the smooth functioning of such an enormous undertaking. Embedded in its words and phrases is a fierce way of thinking (even if we don't see it that way), as well as plausible deniability. And in the good times, its uses are obvious.

On the other hand, when the normal ways of empire cease to function well, that same language can suddenly work to blind the imperial custodians – which is, after all, what the foreign policy "team" of the Obama era is – to necessary realities. At a moment when it might be important to grasp what the "American face" in the mirror actually looks like, you can't see it.

And sometimes what you can't bring yourself to see can, as now, hurt you.

[**Note:** In thinking about a prospective *Dictionary of American Empire-Speak*, I found four Web sites particularly useful for keeping me up to date: Juan Cole's invaluable [Informed Comment](#) (I don't know how he stays at day-in, day-out, year after year); [Antiwar.com](#) and [War in Context](#), where editors with sharp eyes for global developments seem to be on the prowl 24/7; and last but by no means least, Noah Shachtman's [Danger Room blog](#) at Wired.com. Focused on the latest military developments, from strategy and tactics to hunter-killer drones and "robo-beasts," *Danger Room* is not only a must-follow site, but gives an everyday sense of the imperial bizarreness of our American world. Finally, a deep bow of thanks to Christopher Holmes, who keeps the copyediting lights burning in Japan, and TomDispatch eternally chugging along.]