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Entering the Soviet Era in America

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

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Mark it on your calendar. It seems we've finally entered the Soviet era in America.

You remember the Soviet Union, now almost 20 years in its grave. But who gives it a second thought today? Even in its glory years that “evil empire” was sometimes referred to as “the second superpower.” In 1991, after seven decades, it suddenly disintegrated and disappeared, leaving the United States – the “sole superpower,” even the “hyperpower,” on planet Earth – surprised but triumphant.

The USSR had been heading for the exits for quite a while, not that official Washington had a clue. At the moment it happened, Soviet “experts” like [Secretary of Defense Robert Gates](#) (then director of the CIA) still expected the Cold War to [go on and on](#). In Washington, eyes were trained on the might of the Soviet military, which the Soviet leadership had never stopped feeding, even as its sclerotic bureaucracy was rotting, its economy (which had ceased to grow in the late 1970s) was tanking, budget deficits were soaring, indebtedness to other countries was growing, and social welfare payments were eating into what funds remained. Not even a vigorous, reformist leader like Mikhail Gorbachev could stanch the rot, especially when, in the late 1980s, the price of Russian oil fell drastically.

Looking back, the most distinctive feature of the last years of the Soviet Union may have been the way it continued to pour money into its military – and its military adventure in Afghanistan – when it was already going bankrupt and the society it had built was beginning to collapse around it. In the end, its aging leaders made a devastating miscalculation. They mistook military power for power on this planet. Armed to the teeth and possessing a nuclear force capable of destroying the Earth many times over, the Soviets nonetheless remained the vastly poorer, weaker, and (except when it came to the arms race) far less technologically innovative of the two superpowers.

In December 1979, perhaps taking the [bait of the Carter administration](#) whose national security adviser was eager to see the Soviets bloodied by a “Vietnam” of their own, the Red Army invaded Afghanistan to support a weak communist government in Kabul. When resistance in the countryside, led by Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas and backed by the other superpower, only grew, the Soviets sent in more troops, launched major offensives, called in air power, and fought on brutally and futilely for a decade until, in 1989, long after they had been whipped, they withdrew in defeat.

Gorbachev had dubbed Afghanistan “[the bleeding wound](#),” and when the wounded Red Army finally limped home, it was to a country that would soon cease to exist. For the Soviet Union, Afghanistan had literally proven “the graveyard of empires.” If, at the end, its military remained standing, the empire didn’t. (And if you don’t already find this description just a tad eerie, given the present moment in the U.S., you should.)

In Washington, the Bush administration – G.H.W.’s, not G.W.’s – declared victory and then left the much ballyhooed “peace dividend” in the nearest ditch. Caught off guard by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington’s consensus policymakers drew no meaningful lessons from it (just as they had drawn few that mattered from their Vietnam defeat 16 years earlier).

Quite the opposite, successive American administrations would blindly head down the very path that had led the Soviets to ruin. They would serially agree that, in a world without significant enemies, the key to U.S. global power still was the care and feeding of the American military and the military-industrial complex that went with it. As the years passed, that military would be sent ever more regularly into the far reaches of the planet to fight frontier wars, establish military bases, and finally impose a global *Pax Americana* on the planet.

This urge, delusional in retrospect, seemed to reach its ultimate expression in the second Bush administration, whose infamous “unilateralism” rested on a belief that no country or even bloc of countries should ever again be allowed to come close to matching U.S. military power. (As its National Security Strategy of 2002 [put the matter](#) – and it couldn’t have been blunter on the subject – the U.S. was to “build and maintain” its military power “*beyond challenge*.”) Bush’s military fundamentalists firmly believed that, in the face of the most technologically advanced, bulked-up, destructive force around, hostile states would be “shocked and awed” by a simple demonstration of its power and friendly ones would have little choice but to come to heel as well. After all, as the president [said](#) in

front of a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in 2007, the U.S. military was “the greatest force for human liberation the world has ever known.”

In this way, far more than the Soviets, the top officials of the Bush administration mistook military power for power, a gargantuan misreading of the U.S. economic position in the world and of their moment.

Boundless Military Ambitions

The attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that “[Pearl Harbor](#) of the 21st century,” clinched the deal. In the space the Soviet Union had deserted, which had been occupied by minor outlaw states like North Korea for years, there was a new shape-shifting enemy, al-Qaeda (AKA Islamic extremism, AKA the new “totalitarianism”), which could be just as big as you wanted to make it. Suddenly, we were in what the Bush administration instantly dubbed “the Global War on Terror” (GWOT, one of the worst acronyms ever invented) – and this time there would be nothing “cold” about it.

Bush administration officials promptly suggested that they were prepared to use a newly agile American military to “drain the swamp” of global terrorism. (“While we’ll try to find every snake in the swamp, the essence of the strategy is draining the swamp,” [insisted](#) Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz two weeks after 9/11.) They [were prepared](#), they made clear, to undertake those draining operations against Islamic “terrorist networks” in no less than 60 countries around the planet.

Their military ambitions, in other words, knew no bounds; nor, it seemed, did the money and resources which began to flow into the Pentagon, the weapons industries, the country’s [increasingly militarized](#) intelligence services, mercenary companies like Blackwater and [KBR](#) that grew fat on a privatizing administration’s war plans and the multi-billion-dollar no-bid contracts it was eager to proffer, the new Department of Homeland Security, and a ramped-up, ever more powerful national security state.

As the Pentagon expanded, [taking on ever newer roles](#), the numbers would prove staggering. By the end of the Bush years, Washington was [doling out](#) almost twice what the next nine nations combined were spending on their militaries, while total U.S. military expenditures came to just under half the world’s total. Similarly, by 2008, the U.S. [controlled](#) almost 70 percent of the global arms market. It also had 11 aircraft carrier battle groups capable of patrolling the world’s seas and oceans at a time when no power that could faintly be considered a possible future enemy had more than one.

By then, private contractors had built for the Pentagon [almost 300](#) military bases in Iraq, ranging from tiny combat outposts to massive “[American towns](#)” holding tens of thousands of troops and private contractors, with multiple bus lines, PXs, fast-food “boardwalks,” massage parlors, water treatment and power plants, barracks, and airfields. They were in the process of [doing the same](#) in Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, in the [Persian Gulf region](#) generally. This, too, represented a massive investment in what looked like a permanent occupation of the oil heartlands of the planet. As right-wing pundit Max

Boot [put it](#) after a recent flying tour of America's global garrisons, the U.S. possesses military bases that add up to "a virtual American empire of Wal-Mart-style PXs, fast-food restaurants, golf courses, and gyms."

Depending on just [what you counted](#), there were anywhere from 700 to perhaps 1,200 or more U.S. bases, micro to macro, acknowledged and unacknowledged, around the globe. Meanwhile, the Pentagon was pouring money into the [wildest blue-skies thinking](#) at its advanced research arm, DARPA, whose budget grew [by 50 percent](#). Through DARPA, well-funded scientists experimented with various ways to fight [sci-fi-style wars](#) in the near and distant future (at a moment when no one was ready to put significant government money into blue-skies thinking about, for instance, how to improve the education of young Americans). The Pentagon was also pioneering a new form of air power, drone warfare, in which "we" wouldn't be [within thousands of miles](#) of the battlefield, and the battlefield would no longer necessarily be in a country with which we were at war.

It was also embroiled in two disastrous, potentially trillion-dollar wars (and various global skirmishes) – and all this at top dollar at a time when next to no money was being invested in, among other things, the bridges, tunnels, waterworks, and the like that made up an aging American infrastructure. Except when it came to victory, the military stood ever taller, while its many missions expanded exponentially, even as the domestic economy was spinning out of control, budget deficits were increasing rapidly, the governmental bureaucracy was growing ever more sclerotic, and indebtedness to other nations was rising by leaps and bounds.

In other words, in a far wealthier country, another set of leaders, having watched the Soviet Union implode, decisively embarked on the Soviet path to disaster.

Military Profligacy

In the fall of 2008, the abyss opened under the U.S. economy, which the Bush administration had been blissfully ignoring, and millions of people fell into it. Giant institutions wobbled or crashed; extended unemployment wouldn't go away; foreclosures happened on a mind-boggling scale; infrastructure began to buckle; state budgets were caught in a death grip; teachers' jobs, another kind of infrastructure, went down the tubes in startling numbers; and the federal deficit soared.

Of course, a new president also entered the Oval Office, someone (many voters believed) intent on winding up (or at least down) Bush's wars and the delusions of military omnipotence and technological omniscience that went with them. If George W. Bush had pushed this country to the edge of disaster, at least his military policies, as many of his critics saw it, were as extreme and anomalous as the [cult of executive power](#) his top officials fostered.

But here was the strange thing. In the midst of the Great Recession, under a new president with assumedly far fewer illusions about American omnipotence and power,

war policy continued to expand in just about every way. The Pentagon budget rose by Bushian increments in fiscal year 2010; and while the Iraq War reached a kind of dismal stasis, the new president doubled down in Afghanistan on entering office – and then doubled down again before the end of 2009. There, he “[surged](#)” in multiple [ways](#). At best, the U.S. was only drawing down one war, in Iraq, to feed the flames of another.

As in the Soviet Union before its collapse, the exaltation and feeding of the military at the expense of the rest of society and the economy had by now become the new normal; so much so that hardly a serious word could be said – lest you not “support our troops” – when it came to ending the American way of war or downsizing the global mission or ponying up [the funds](#) demanded of Congress to pursue war preparations and war-making.

Even when, after years of astronomical growth, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [began to talk](#) about cost-cutting at the Pentagon, it was in the service of the reallocation of ever more money to war-fighting. Here was how the *New York Times* [summed up](#) what reduction actually meant for our ultimate super-sized institution in tough times: “Current budget plans project growth of only 1 percent in the Pentagon budget, after inflation, over the next five years.” *Only* 1 percent growth – at a time when state budgets, for instance, are being [slashed](#) to the bone. Like the Soviet military, the Pentagon, in other words, is planning to remain obese whatever else goes down.

Meanwhile, the “antiwar” president has been overseeing the expansion of the new normal on many fronts, including the expanding [size of the Army](#) itself. In fact, when it comes to the Global War on Terror – even with the name now in disuse – the profligacy can still take your breath away.

Consider, for instance, the \$2.2 billion Host Nation Trucking contract the Pentagon uses to [pay protection money](#) to Afghan security companies which, in turn, [slip](#) some part of those payments to the Taliban to let American supplies travel safely on Afghan roads. Or if you don’t want to think about how your tax dollar supports the Taliban, consider the \$683,000 the Pentagon [spent](#), according to the *Washington Post*, to “renovate a cafe that sells ice cream and Starbucks coffee” at its base/prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Or the \$773,000 used there “to remodel a cinder-block building to house a KFC/Taco Bell restaurant,” or the \$7.3 million spent on baseball and football fields, or the \$60,000 batting cage, or a promised \$20,000 soccer cage, all part of the approximately \$2 billion that have gone into the American base and prison complex that Barack Obama promised to, [but can’t](#), close.

Or what about the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, that 104-acre, almost [three-quarters-of-a-billion-dollar](#), 21-building [homage](#) to the American-mall-as-fortified-citadel? It costs [more than \\$1.5 billion](#) a year to run, and bears about as much relationship to an “embassy” as McDonald’s does to a neighborhood hamburger joint. [According to a recent audit](#), millions of dollars in “federal property” assigned to what is essentially a vast command center for the region, including 159 of the embassy’s 1,168 vehicles, are missing or unaccounted for.

And as long as we're talking about expansion in distant lands, how about the Pentagon's most recent [construction plans](#) in Central Asia, part of a prospective "mini-building boom" there. They are to include an anti-terrorism training center to be constructed for a bargain basement \$5.5 million in... no, not Toledo or Akron or El Paso, but the [combustible](#) city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. And that's just one of several projects there and in neighboring Tajikistan that are reportedly to be funded out of the U.S. Central Command's "counter-narcotics fund" (and ultimately, of course, your pocket).

Or consider a particularly striking example of military expansion under President Obama, superbly reported by the *Washington Post*'s Karen DeYoung and Greg Jaffe in a piece [headlined](#), "U.S. 'Secret War' Expands Globally as Special Operations Forces Take Larger Role." As a story, it sank without a trace in a country evidently unfazed by the idea of having its forces garrisoned and potentially readying to fight everywhere on the planet.

Here's how the piece began:

"Beneath its commitment to soft-spoken diplomacy and beyond the combat zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Obama administration has significantly expanded a largely secret U.S. war against al-Qaeda and other radical groups, according to senior military and administration officials. Special Operations forces have grown both in number and budget, and are deployed in 75 countries, compared with about 60 at the beginning of last year."

Now, without opening an atlas, just try to name *any* 75 countries on this planet – more than one-third, that is, of the states belonging to the United Nations. And yet U.S. special operatives are now engaging in war, or preparing for war, or training others to do so, or [covertly collecting intelligence](#) in that many countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Fifteen more than in the Bush era.

Whatever it is or isn't called, this remains Bush's Global War on Terror on an expansionist trajectory. DeYoung and Jaffe quote an unnamed "senior military official" saying that the Obama administration has allowed "things that the previous administration did not," and report that Special Operations commanders are now "a far more regular presence at the White House" than in the Bush years.

Not surprisingly, those Special Operations forces have themselves expanded in the first year and a half of the Obama presidency and, for fiscal year 2011, with 13,000 of them already deployed abroad, the administration has requested a 5.7 percent hike in their budget to \$6.3 billion.

Once upon a time, Special Operations forces got their name because they were small and "special." Now, they are, in essence, being transformed into a covert military within the military and, as befits their growing size, [reports](#) Noah Shachtman of the *Wired*'s Danger Room, the Army Special Forces alone are slated to get a new \$100 million "headquarters" in northern Afghanistan. It will cover about 17 acres and will include a

“communications building, Tactical Operations Center, training facility, medical aid station, Vehicle Maintenance Facility... dining facility, laundry facility, and a kennel to support working dogs.... Supporting facilities include roads, power production system and electrical distribution, water well, non-potable water production, water storage, water distribution, sanitary sewer collection system, communication manhole/duct system, curbs, walkways, drainage and parking.”

This headquarters, adds Shachtman, will take a year to build, “at which point, the U.S. is allegedly supposed to begin drawing down its forces in Afghanistan. Allegedly.” And mind you, the Special Operations troops are but one expanding part of the U.S. military.

Creeping Gigantism

The first year and a half of the Obama administration has seen a continuation of what could be considered the monumental socialist-realist era of American war-making (including a decision to [construct](#) another huge, Baghdad-style “embassy” in Islamabad, Pakistan). This sort of creeping gigantism, with all its assorted cost overruns and private [perks](#), would undoubtedly have seemed familiar to the Soviets. Certainly no less familiar will be the near decade the U.S. military has spent, increasingly disastrously, in the Afghan graveyard.

Drunk on war as Washington may be, the U.S. is still not the Soviet Union in 1991 – not yet. But it’s not the triumphant “sole superpower” anymore either. Its global power is [visibly waning](#), its ability to win wars distinctly in question, its economic viability open to doubt. It has been [transformed](#) from a can-do into a can’t-do nation, a fact only highlighted by the ongoing BP catastrophe and “rescue” in the Gulf of Mexico. Its airports are [less shiny](#) and more Third World-like every year. Unlike France or China, it has not a mile of high-speed rail. And when it comes to the future, especially the creation and support of innovative industries in alternative energy, it’s chasing the [pack](#). It is increasingly a low-end service economy, [losing good jobs](#) that will never return.

And if its armies come home in defeat... watch out.

In 1991, the Soviet Union suddenly evaporated. The Cold War was over. Like many wars, it seemed to have an obvious winner and an obvious loser. Nearly 20 years later, as the U.S. heads down the Soviet road to disaster – even if the world can’t imagine what a bankrupt America might mean – it’s far clearer that, in the titanic struggle of the two superpowers that we came to call the Cold War, there were actually two losers, and that, when the “second superpower” left the scene, the first was already heading for the exits, just ever so slowly and in a state of self-intoxicated self-congratulation. Nearly every decision in Washington since then, including Barack Obama’s to expand both the Afghan War and the war on terror, has only made what, in 1991, was one possible path seem like fate itself.

Call up the Politburo in Washington. We’re in trouble.

