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Is America Hooked on War?

By Tom Engelhardt

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"War is peace" was one of the memorable slogans on the facade of the Ministry of Truth, *Minitrue* in "Newspeak," the language invented by George Orwell in 1948 for his dystopian novel *1984*. Some 60 years later, a quarter-century after Orwell's imagined future bit the dust, the phrase is, in a number of ways, eerily applicable to the United States.

Last week, for instance, a *New York Times* front-page story by Eric Schmitt and David Sanger was [headlined](#) "Obama Is Facing Doubts in Party on Afghanistan, Troop Buildup at Issue." It offered a modern version of journalistic Newspeak.

"Doubts," of course, imply dissent, and in fact just the week before there had been a major break in Washington's ranks, though not among Democrats. The conservative columnist George Will wrote a piece offering blunt advice to the Obama administration, summed up in its [headline](#): "Time to Get Out of Afghanistan." In our age of political and audience fragmentation and polarization, think of this as the Afghan version of Vietnam's [Cronkite moment](#).

The *Times* report on those Democratic doubts, on the other hand, represented a more typical Washington moment. Ignored, for instance, was Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold's end-of-August [call](#) for the president to develop an Afghan withdrawal timetable. The focus of the piece was instead an upcoming speech by Michigan Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee. He was, Schmitt and Sanger reported, planning to push back against well-placed leaks (in [the Times](#), among other places) indicating that war commander General Stanley McChrystal was urging the president to commit 15,000 to 45,000 more American troops to the Afghan War.

Here, according to the two reporters, was the gist of Levin's message about what everyone [agrees](#) is a "deteriorating" U.S. position: "[H]e was against sending more American combat troops to Afghanistan until the United States speeded up the training and equipping of more Afghan security forces."

Think of this as the [line in the sand](#) within the Democratic Party, and be assured that the debates within the halls of power over McChrystal's troop requests and Levin's proposal are likely to be fierce this fall. Thought about for a moment, however, both positions can be summed up with the same word: More.

The essence of this "debate" comes down to: More of *them* versus more of *us* (and keep in mind that more of them — an expanded training program for the Afghan National Army — actually means more of "us" in the form of [extra trainers](#) and advisors). In other words, however contentious the disputes in Washington, however [dismally](#) the public now views the war, however much the president's war coalition might threaten to crack open, the only choices will be between more and more.

No alternatives are likely to get a real hearing. Few alternative policy proposals even exist because alternatives that don't fit with "more" have ceased to be part of Washington's war culture. No serious thought, effort, or investment goes into them. Clearly referring to Will's column, one of the unnamed "senior officials" who swarm through our major newspapers made the administration's position clear, saying sardonically, [according to](#) the *Washington Post*, "I don't anticipate that the briefing books for the [administration] principals on these debates over the next weeks and months will be filled with submissions from opinion columnists... I do anticipate they will be filled with vigorous discussion... of how successful we've been to date."

State of War

Because the United States does not look like a militarized country, it's hard for Americans to grasp that Washington is a war capital, that the United States is a war state, that it [garrisons](#) much of the planet, and that the norm for us is to be at war somewhere at any moment. Similarly, we've become used to the idea that, when various forms of force (or threats of force) don't work, our response, as in Afghanistan, is to recalibrate and apply some alternate version of the same under a new or rebranded name — the hot one now being "counterinsurgency" or COIN — in a marginally different manner. When it comes to war, as well as preparations for war, more is now generally the order of the day.

This wasn't always the case. The early Republic that the most hawkish conservatives love to cite was a land whose leaders looked with suspicion on the very idea of a standing army. They would have viewed our hundreds of global garrisons, our vast network of spies, agents, Special Forces teams, surveillance operatives, interrogators, rent-a-guns, and mercenary corporations, as well as our staggering Pentagon budget and the constant future-war gaming and planning that accompanies it, with genuine horror.

The question is: What kind of country do we actually live in when the so-called [U.S. Intelligence Community](#) (IC) lists [16](#) intelligence services ranging from Air Force Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency to the National Reconnaissance Office and the National Security Agency? What could "intelligence" mean once spread over 16 sizeable, bureaucratic, often competing outfits with a cumulative 2009 [budget](#) estimated at more than \$55 billion (a startling percentage of which is controlled by the Pentagon)? What exactly is so intelligent about all that? And why does no one think it even mildly strange or in any way out of the ordinary?

What does it mean when the most military-obsessed administration in our history, which, year after year, submitted ever more bloated Pentagon budgets to Congress, is succeeded by one headed by a president who ran, at least partially, on an antiwar platform, and who has now submitted [an even larger Pentagon budget](#)? What does this tell you about Washington and about the viability of non-militarized alternatives to the path George W. Bush took? What does it mean when the new administration, surveying nearly eight years and two wars' worth of disasters, decides to [expand](#) the U.S. Armed Forces rather than shrink the U.S. global mission?

What kind of a world do we inhabit when, with an official unemployment rate of 9.7% and an underemployment rate of 16.8%, the American taxpayer is financing the building of a three-story, exceedingly permanent-looking [\\$17 million troop barracks](#) at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan? This, in turn, is part of a taxpayer-funded \$220 million upgrade of the base that includes new "water treatment plants, headquarters buildings, fuel farms, and power generating plants." And what about the U.S. air base [built at](#) Balad, north of Baghdad, that now has 15 bus routes, two fire stations, two water treatment plants, two sewage treatment plants, two power plants, a water bottling plant, and the [requisite set](#) of fast-food outlets, PXes, and so on, as well as air traffic levels sometimes [compared to](#) those at Chicago's O'Hare International?

What kind of American world are we living in when a plan to withdraw most U.S. troops from Iraq involves the removal of [more than 1.5 million pieces](#) of equipment? Or in which the possibility of withdrawal leads the Pentagon to [issue](#) nearly billion-dollar contracts (new ones!) to increase the number of private security contractors in that country?

What do you make of a world in which the U.S. has [robot assassins](#) in the skies over its war zones, 24/7, and the "pilots" who control them from thousands of miles away are ready on a moment's notice to launch missiles — ["Hellfire" missiles](#) at that — into Pashtun peasant villages in the wild, mountainous borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan? What does it mean when American pilots can be at war "in" Afghanistan, 9 to 5, by remote control, while their bodies remain at a base outside Las Vegas and then can [head home](#) past a sign that warns them to drive carefully because this is "the most dangerous part of your day"?

What does it mean when, for our security and future safety, the Pentagon funds the wildest ideas imaginable for developing high-tech weapons systems, many of which sound as if they came straight out of the pages of sci-fi novels? Take, for example, [Boeing's advanced coordinated system](#) of hand-held drones, robots, sensors, and other battlefield surveillance equipment slated for seven Army brigades within the next two years at a cost of \$2 billion and for the full Army by 2025; or the [Next Generation Bomber](#), an advanced "platform" slated for 2018; or a [truly futuristic bomber](#), "a suborbital semi-spacecraft able to move at hypersonic speed along the edge of the atmosphere," for 2035? What does it mean about our world when those people in our government peering deepest into a blue-skies future are planning ways to send armed "platforms" up into those skies and kill more than a quarter century from now?

And do you ever wonder about this: If such weaponry is being endlessly developed for our safety and security, and that of our children and grandchildren, why is it that one of our most successful businesses involves the sale of the same weaponry to other countries? Few Americans are comfortable thinking about this, which may explain why global-arms-trade pieces don't tend to make it onto the front pages of our newspapers. Recently, the *Times*

Pentagon correspondent Thom Shanker, for instance, [wrote](#) a piece on the subject which appeared inside the paper on a quiet Labor Day. "Despite Slump, U.S. Role as Top Arms Supplier Grows" was the headline. Perhaps Shanker, too, felt uncomfortable with his subject, because he included the following generic description: "In the highly competitive global arms market, nations vie for both profit and political influence through weapons sales, in particular to developing nations..." The figures he cited from a new congressional study of that "highly competitive" market told a different story: The U.S., with \$37.8 billion in arms sales (up \$12.4 billion from 2007), controlled 68.4% of the global arms market in 2008. Highly competitively speaking, Italy came "a distant second" with \$3.7 billion. In sales to "developing nations," the U.S. inked \$29.6 billion in weapons agreements or 70.1% of the market. Russia was a vanishingly distant second at \$3.3 billion or 7.8% of the market. In other words, with 70% of the market, the U.S. actually has what, in any other field, would qualify as a monopoly position — in this case, in things that go boom in the night. With the American car industry in a ditch, it seems that this (along with Hollywood films that go boom in the night) is what we now do best, as befits a war, if not warrior, state. Is that an American accomplishment you're comfortable with?

On the day I'm writing this piece, "Names of the Dead," a feature which appears almost daily in my hometown newspaper, records the death of an Army private from DeKalb, Illinois, in Afghanistan. Among the spare facts offered: he was 20 years old, which means he was probably born not long before the First Gulf War was launched in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush. If you include that war, which never really ended — low-level U.S. military actions against Saddam Hussein's regime continued until the invasion of 2003 — as well as U.S. actions in the former Yugoslavia and Somalia, not to speak of the steady warfare underway since November 2001, in his short life, there was hardly a moment in which the U.S. wasn't engaged in military operations somewhere on the planet (invariably thousands of miles from home). If that private left a one-year-old baby behind in the States, and you believe the [statements](#) of various military officials, that child could pass her tenth birthday before the war in which her father died comes to an end. Given the record of these last years, and the present military talk about being better prepared for "the next war," she could reach 2025, the age when she, too, might join the military without ever spending a warless day. Is that the future you had in mind?

Consider this: War is now the American way, even if peace is what most Americans experience while [their proxies](#) fight in distant lands. Any serious alternative to war, which means our "security," is increasingly inconceivable. In Orwellian terms then, war is indeed peace in the United States and peace, war.

American Newspeak

Newspeak, as Orwell imagined it, was an ever more constricted form of English that would, sooner or later, make "all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended," he wrote in an appendix to his novel, "that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought... should be literally unthinkable."

When it comes to war (and peace), we live in a world of American Newspeak in which alternatives to a state of war are not only ever more unacceptable, but ever harder to imagine. If war is now our permanent situation, in good Orwellian fashion it has also been sundered from a set of words that once accompanied it.

It lacks, for instance, "victory." After all, when was the last time the U.S. actually won a war (unless you include our "victories" over small countries incapable of defending themselves like the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983 or powerless Panama in 1989)? The smashing "victory" over Saddam Hussein in the First Gulf War only led to a stop-and-start conflict now almost two decades old that has proved a catastrophe. Keep heading backward through the Vietnam and Korean Wars and the last time the U.S. military was truly victorious was in 1945.

But achieving victory no longer seems to matter. War American-style is now conceptually unending, as are preparations for it. When George W. Bush proclaimed a Global War on Terror (aka [World War IV](#)), conceived as a "generational struggle" like the Cold War, he caught a certain American reality. In a sense, the ongoing war system can't absorb victory. Any such endpoint might indeed prove to be a kind of defeat.

No longer has war anything to do with the taking of territory either, or even with direct conquest. War is increasingly a state of being, not a process with a beginning, an end, and an actual geography.

Similarly drained of its traditional meaning has been the word "security" — though it has moved from a state of being (secure) to an eternal, [immensely profitable process](#) whose endpoint is unachievable. If we ever decided we were either secure enough, or more willing to live without the unreachable idea of total security, the American way of war and the national security state would lose much of their meaning. In other words, in our world, security *is* insecurity.

As for "peace," war's companion and theoretical opposite, though still used in official speeches, it, too, has been emptied of meaning and all but discredited. Appropriately enough, diplomacy, that part of government which classically would have been associated with peace, or at least with the pursuit of the goals of war by other means, has been dwarfed by, subordinated to, or even subsumed by the Pentagon. In recent years, the U.S. military with its vast funds has taken over, or encroached upon, a range of activities that once would have been left to an underfunded State Department, especially humanitarian aid operations, foreign aid, and what's now called nation-building. (On this subject, check out Stephen Glain's recent essay, "[The American Leviathan](#)" in the *Nation* magazine.)

Diplomacy itself has been militarized and, like our country, is now hidden [behind massive fortifications](#), and has been placed under [Lord-of-the-Flies-style](#) guard. The State Department's embassies are [now bunkers](#) and military-style headquarters for the prosecution of war policies; its officials, when enough of them can be found, are now sent out into the provinces in war zones to do "civilian" things.

And peace itself? Simply put, there's no money in it. Of the nearly trillion dollars the U.S. invests in war and war-related activities, nothing goes to peace. No money, no effort, no thought. The very idea that there might be peaceful alternatives to endless war is so discredited that it's left to utopians, bleeding hearts, and [feathered doves](#). As in Orwell's Newspeak, while "peace" remains with us, it's largely been shorn of its possibilities. No longer the opposite of war, it's just a rhetorical flourish embedded, like one of our reporters, in Warspeak.

What a world might be like in which we began not just to withdraw our troops from one war to fight another, but to seriously scale down the American global mission, close those hundreds of bases — recently, there were [almost 300 of them](#), macro to micro, in Iraq alone — and bring our military home is beyond imagining. To discuss such obviously absurd possibilities makes you an apostate to America's true religion and addiction, which is force. However much it might seem that most of us are peaceably watching our TV sets or computer screens or iPhones, we Americans are also — always — marching as to war. We may not all bother to attend [the church](#) of our new religion, but we all tithe. We all partake. In this sense, we live peaceably in a state of war.