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The News Herlad

America involved in endless wars

By Georgie Anne Geyer

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Every day now, at least if you peruse one of the big Eastern American newspapers, you read about our wars: Fighting in Afghanistan, in its 10th year! Collapse in Pakistan! American troops still in Iraq! American troops and/or drone strikes in Somalia, Yemen and various countries of Africa, plus threats to China over oil in the South China Sea!

If you plumb just a little bit below that warfare on the surface, you will find that current Pentagon outlays are roughly \$700 billion annually, the U.S. spending more on its military than the rest of the world combined. That we have approximately 300,000 troops stationed abroad, occupying some 761 bases, or euphemistically called "sites," in 39 foreign countries — an "empire of bases." And that the Pentagon, being neat and precise in its habits, has divided up the planet into eight "unified commands" in order to, well, order the world.

Ahhh, but all this military expansionism is merely temporary, the loyal American citizen will say. It is a result of America's having to fight the Cold War with the Soviets — and now, on top of that, having to face down Islamic radicalism. It is not, in short, who we are, a peaceable people forced into wars against our better selves. But instead of patting ourselves on the back, perhaps we ought to study a quote of the great philosopher Joseph Schumpeter, who wrote of the military created by imperialist states: "Created by the wars that required it, the machine now created the wars it required."

Indeed, there is a growing school of military men and political thinkers coming to the fore who believe that the United States is now creating wars it either thinks it requires or that it simply desires to fight, to illustrate its predominance and grandeur before the world. This is not a line of thought that is easily going to fade away.

If you wonder about this growing camaraderie of unusual "peaceniks," one of the books you should pick up is "Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War." The author is the respected Andrew J. Bacevich, retired U.S. Army colonel and professor of history and international relations at Boston University. And his operative words are "permanent war" or, as he sometimes puts it, "perpetual war."

Bacevich, who often appears on television with his revisionist viewpoints, recalls first how the original Founding Fathers saw even the young America as a leader of the world — a "city upon a hill: where the city's inhabitants should seek not to compel or enforce, but to exemplify and illuminate." Instead, in a total turnaround, today America seeks to frighten and to enforce its will.

Vietnam, of course, was the first warning of the new era. But Bacevich is astonished at the degree to which America, and especially the military, barely learned from Vietnam. "In retrospect," he writes, "what distinguishes the legacy of Vietnam is not how much things changed, but how little."

We came to the point where there is only one person at the top of the Pentagon/White House leadership who has personal memories of Vietnam; where generals speak of "a generational war" or a 50- to 100-year war against Islamic radicalism or "open-ended" wars — and the American people seem to pay not the slightest attention.

Is it because the troops are volunteers and not draftees? Because newspapers around the country have declined to such an extent that they barely print anything on Afghanistan or Iraq? Because our public life — television, radio, movies, political campaigns — has become so violent and filled with eternal conflict the American public no longer finds war an unusual activity? Or perhaps because of the common American idea that if America is good, then all of its actions must naturally be benign? One could make any of those points with perfectly cogent argumentation.

The Eastern papers are filled with portions of Bob Woodward's book "Obama's Wars," showing the degree to which Obama disagreed with his generals on Afghanistan — but in the end, he went along with them. Meanwhile, another book, "Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima/9-11/Iraq" by John W. Dower, makes many of the same points as Bacevich.

Finally, Bacevich looks at the generation of officers represented by Gen. David Petraeus, commander in Afghanistan, and finds that, "They came to view war as commonplace, a quasi-permanent aspect of everyday reality. Moreover, their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan persuaded them to see armed conflict as an open-ended enterprise. Wars no longer ended."

Ironically, we were the most blessed of all nations, not only in the integrity of our original principles but in our sheer physical security. But instead of using that security for peaceable motives and to build up our own culture, schools, industries and infrastructure, we have used exactly this moment in history to travel about the world looking for wars to fight. The 9/11 attack could have been easily — and truly — revenged by special forces, by intelligence agents and by cunning diplomacy aimed precisely at al-Qaida, and not by fighting every nation between here and the Khyber Pass. It is time we paid serious attention to why we seem to have opted for perpetual war instead.