

# The High Cost of American Hubris

Americans have paid a very high price for the Establishment's imperial ambitions, a price passing a breaking point in blood and money, a problem that must be addressed with realism and humility, explains Natylie Baldwin.

By Natylie Baldwin

Although renowned political scientist John Mearsheimer does not consider himself to be an isolationist – a term which has acquired a negative connotation since WWII – his definition is illuminating as much for clarifying what the term does not mean as for what it does.

In *America Unhinged*, Mearsheimer writes: "Isolationism rests on the assumption that no region of the world outside of the Western Hemisphere is of vital strategic importance to the United States. Isolationists do not argue that America has no interests in the wider world, just that they are not important enough to justify deploying military force to defend them. They are fully in favor of engaging with the rest of the world economically as well as diplomatically, but they view all foreign wars as unnecessary."

As Mearsheimer makes plain, isolationism does not constitute a lack of constructive engagement with the outside world, but a judicious engagement that eschews military action outside of defending the homeland.

At a time when Washington is experiencing the hubris of imperial overreach and the prospect of the eventual collapse that history shows is the inevitable endgame of all empires, it is time for concerned Americans across the political spectrum to begin to seriously consider what a new paradigm and policy platform representing sanity might look like.

It is in the U.S.'s long-term interests (as well as the rest of the world's) to have stability. The bare minimum for stability is a lack of war.

As science writer John Horgan concluded in his book *The End of War* in which he undertook a scientific analysis of war via the study of history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, the old adage about justice being a prerequisite for peace is wrong. It is peace that is necessary for justice to take root. The violent, chaotic and wasteful conditions of modern war are not conducive to the pursuit of justice or human development.

Most Americans do not share the Neoliberal, Neoconservative, or Responsibility to Protect club's messianic vision of an America that needs to recreate the world to fit some bastardized idea of imperial "democracy" that requires a Year

Zero program to destroy the social, cultural and political foundations of target countries (see Iraq, Libya, and Syria).

The restoration of our democratic republic and the revitalization of our economy and society are intimately connected to pulling out of the militarist/imperialist projects that are killing our country, along with the casualties it is responsible for around the world. It was estimated last year by physicians' groups that deaths in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan from the U.S. "war on terror" (USWOT) are 1.3 million at the conservative end.

The predictable blowback from friends and family members of those decapitated and blown apart by drone strikes and indiscriminate bombings, as well as shootings by soldiers whose psyches have been warped by immersion in the hellhole of counter-insurgency wars that are unwinnable, should give all Americans serious pause in terms of rational problem-solving toward the goal of increasing the conditions for peace and stability.

The casualties from the physicians' groups does not even count the thousands dead in the Libyan civil war, precipitated by the US/NATO toppling of the Gaddafi government – a stable, secular government that had attained the highest standard of living in all of Africa – or our attempts to similarly support nihilistic jihadists who want to topple the Assad regime in Syria and the killing frenzy that has resulted in that country.

Other historians and political scientists, going further back in the American Empire's reign, have estimated 20 million to 30 million people have perished as a result of Washington's covert operations and overt military interventions that have occurred almost continuously since 1945.

Take a moment to let that really sink in. Each of those 20 million to 30 million was a living, breathing person who – like you and me – had hopes, dreams, fears and other people who loved them. With this track record, is it any wonder that the world views the U.S. as the biggest threat to world peace by a wide margin?

### **The Morally and Intellectually Bankrupt**

The U.S. needs to take the lead on de-militarizing and using the freed-up focus and resources to begin engineering a soft landing for the inevitable imperial/economic decline that we are already experiencing. By any rational measure, our interventions have been disasters, creating more problems than they solve. There is a reason why we are known in other parts of the world as "The Empire of Chaos."

We use our military to relentlessly kill and destroy because our political leaders no longer have the will or imagination to build something

constructive. Militarism is the refuge of the morally and intellectually bankrupt.

With a Pentagon budget that comprises 54 percent of the discretionary budget – not counting the black budget expenditures of intelligence agencies estimated at an additional \$52 billion annually – this is 4 percent more than 1990 levels – the time at which the late expert on the military industrial complex, Seymour Melman, made the following observation:

“The American ruling class, by 1990, has become a state/corporate managerial entity. Together they control the military-industrial complex. ... The war economy, in the service of extending the decision power and wealth of America’s state and corporate managers, has been consuming the US civilian infrastructure. Roads, bridges, the water supply, waste disposal systems, housing, medical care facilities, schools are in disrepair from coast to coast.”

Currently, the number one spender on the military at approximately 50 percent of the world total, we are also set to spend \$1 trillion on an updated nuclear arsenal, partly justified by a rivalry with the Russian Federation, a face-off that is recognized as largely contrived by those who have a true understanding of post-Soviet U.S.-Russia relations.

As a nuclear superpower that enjoys the protection of vast oceans on both its shores and relatively cordial relations with our neighbors to the north and south, the U.S. has not experienced a war on its soil for 150 years and the Civil War did not involve any foreign invasion.

Further, according to research last year by ex-CIA agent Philip Giraldi, only two Americans died overseas in terrorist attacks outside of war zones and only 26 deaths occurred domestically from jihadist terrorism since 9/11 – averaging less than two deaths per year. If we add to that the deaths from the attacks in San Bernadino and Orlando, the total is 91. This is fewer than the number of victims of domestic terrorists.

So how does a virtually non-existent threat of invasion or the issue of terrorism justify billions of dollars wasted on militarism, thousands of deaths and injuries of American military personnel and millions more non-Americans (mostly civilians), and loss of civil liberties? Where is the logic and conscience in this equation?

Given the fact that Russian leaders Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have reached out repeatedly since 2000 to cooperate toward the resolution of security issues that would include and respect everyone’s interests on the greater European continent, coupled with the fact that any terrorist threat from Middle

East jihadists has been greatly magnified, if not initiated, by Washington's militarist policies in that region, it is safe to say that our country's policymakers have the capability to greatly minimize what little foreign threat there may be to the U.S. through a shift in policy.

It is incumbent upon the U.S. to make this shift as its policy actions over the past 25 years have created or exacerbated the worst problems of instability in the international arena. Moreover, these policies have done so by running up an astronomical debt to foreign countries that the policies are now working to antagonize.

U.S. policymakers have done all this at the expense of the well-being of the majority of Americans by wasting huge sums of money that could be used to improve our D+ level infrastructure, to raise our medical standards from the bottom of the industrialized world and to address the true unemployment rate of 23 percent.

## **Costs of US Imperialism and Militarism**

### *Military Bases and Blowback*

The U.S. currently has hundreds of military bases on every continent except Antarctica, costing \$250 billion annually to maintain. Ironically, these bases tend to create the need for still more bases. They promote resentment in areas where American GI's live in pampered bubbles, located on prime real estate, and in culturally divergent ways relative to the natives.

At the time that Chalmers Johnson wrote *The Sorrows of Empire* in 2004, the Department of Defense (DOD) publicly acknowledged 725 bases around the world, although there were understood to be significantly more due to secrecy and various means of obscuring the presence of a military installation by using euphemisms in different documents (e.g. in connection with Israel).

Despite the official tally by the DOD having dropped somewhat in recent years, there are undoubtedly many more bases now with the accession of nine more countries to NATO, along with bombing campaigns extended to several more countries and covert military operations expanded into numerous others as well as the proliferation of smaller "lily pad" style bases.

As Chalmers Johnson wrote (p. 152): "There is something else at work, which I believe is the post-Cold War discovery of our immense power, rationalized by the self-glorifying conclusion that because we have it, we deserve to have it. The only truly common elements in the totality of America's foreign bases are imperialism and militarism – an impulse on the part of our elites to dominate other peoples largely because we have the power to do so, followed by the

strategic reasoning that, in order to defend these newly acquired outposts and control the regions they are in, we must expand the areas under our control with still more bases.

“To maintain its empire, the Pentagon must constantly invent new reasons for keeping in our hands as many bases as possible long after the wars and crises that led to their creation have evaporated. As the Senate Foreign Relations Committee observed as long ago as 1970: ‘Once an American overseas base is established it takes on a life of its own. Original missions may become outdated but new missions are developed, not only with the intention of keeping the facility going, but often to actually enlarge it.’”

Billions of dollars are spent annually on constructing and maintaining these bases just in the Middle East where estimates of the number of military bases in Afghanistan alone had ranged up to 411 at one point. Bases in this region are mostly on behalf of the goal of protecting Persian Gulf oil supplies. Indeed, \$40 trillion is estimated to have been spent on this over the past 40 years.

This begs a couple of questions: (1) wouldn't it be cheaper and more humane to simply invest in energy efficiency and renewables that would create American jobs? (2) or, how about just paying a fair market price for these fossil fuels? Regardless of any particular regime's rhetoric against the U.S. or the West, they'd still want to make money at the end of the day. Not to mention, we'd be supporting the concept of markets, which we claim to hold in such high esteem as to border on the religious.

Moreover, as Michael Scheuer, former CIA specialist on the Middle East for 22 years, argues persuasively, one of the primary reasons that young Muslim males in the region are motivated to blow themselves up in terrorist actions against the U.S. is due to the presence of American military bases on sovereign and Muslim lands. Virtually no Muslims – no matter how radical – are motivated to commit such acts because of the way we live within our own borders.

### **American Victims of Empire**

Over 7,000 American military personnel have lost their lives so far in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, 56 percent of veterans are receiving treatment with the VA, half have applied for permanent disability and a third are being treated for PTSD, anxiety, and/or depression. Some 250,000 have suffered a traumatic brain injury and close to 2,000 have had limbs amputated. Approximately 175,000 veterans are 70 – 100 percent disabled. It is estimated that care and compensation for veterans of these wars over the coming decades will reach \$1 trillion.

The overall cost of these wars is projected to be \$6 trillion, enough for every American household to receive \$75,000. Although, military investment does produce some jobs, investment in other sectors of the economy, like healthcare, would produce far more.

According to geopolitical analyst, Conn Hallinan, “We spend more on our ‘official’ military budget than we do on Medicare, Medicaid, Health and Human Services, Education, and Housing and Urban Development combined.”

In fact, if that \$6 trillion spent on wars in the Middle East was to be invested in projects that improved Americans’ lives, we could achieve the following and still have some left over:

1. Completely upgrade our ailing infrastructure (\$3.6 trillion);
2. Invest the upfront costs to implement the Stanford University plan for 100 percent renewable energy in the U.S. by 2050, creating almost 6 million jobs over 40 years in the process (\$350 billion\*);
3. Expand Medicare to cover all Americans (\$394 billion);
- 4 Double the salary of all high school teachers (\$80 billion)

Instead, we have the budgetary sinkhole that has become the security state; simultaneously, our politicians have implemented major tax cuts for the wealthy. The result over the past 15 years is that we have witnessed the largest transfer of money upward to the wealthiest segment of our society.

Four hundred Americans now have more wealth, totaling \$2 trillion, than 50 percent of all Americans combined. We have also officially become an oligarchy, where only corporations and the super wealthy are able to influence policy.

What are the implications of this chasm in socioeconomic equality in terms of America’s security?

### **Inequality and Domestic Security**

In their seminal 2009 book, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett explain their findings from years of research on social inequality and its relationship to the security of societies.

Based on studies of the wealthiest nations (market democracies), societies that have greater disparities of wealth – and, hence, social status – tend to experience lower levels of well-being and stability as indicated by the following criteria: 1) lower levels of trust among members of society, 2) higher

rates of mental illness and addiction, 3) lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality rates, 4) more obesity, 5) lower children's educational performance, 6) higher teenage births, 7) more homicides, 8) high incarceration rates, and 9) less social mobility.

These trends held regardless of the overall wealth of the societies involved. More equality made between 3 and 10 times a difference in well-being and social security when comparing the market democracies of the world.

Let's look at how the U.S. rates on these criteria:

- 1) Only 1/3 of Americans trust others, according to a 2013 AP-GfK poll
- 2) The U.S. has the highest rate of mental illness, including addiction, in the world (WHO)
- 3) Life expectancy for the U.S. is 26th out of the 36 OECD nations, while the U.S. also has the worst infant mortality rate in the West (CDC)
- 4) According to a study published by The Lancet in 2014, the US is the most obese nation on the planet
- 5) The U.S. ranks 36<sup>th</sup> in the world for educational performance
- 6) The U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the developed world (CDC)
- 7) The U.S. ranks first in homicide rates in the western world and seventh for the entire world
- 8) The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of any nation on earth, both in terms of the per capita rate and the overall number of people locked up
- 9) A child born into poverty in the U.S. today has a 33 percent chance of moving up the socioeconomic ladder, compared to a 50 percent chance in 1946

As it turns out, America is indeed exceptional, but not in the way President Obama would like everyone to believe.

Wilkinson and Pickett also found that, although the poorest of the population reaped the most benefits from equalization measures, the entire population benefited to some degree from more equality. Furthermore, it was recognized that past a certain level, increases in material gain did not produce more happiness or well-being among people. In other words, once a person's basic needs were satisfied comfortably, there was a law of diminishing returns for acquiring more wealth or material goods.

Another point that was made by the authors was that societies did not need to

follow only one model to achieve more equality. What mattered was that there were effective mechanisms of some kind in place to facilitate more equality in a society. At the time of the book's publication, there were two models recognized among the market democracies: the Scandinavian model of social welfare programs provided by the state and the Japanese model that encouraged less disparity in incomes between different levels of society, obviating the need for many state welfare programs.

For example, as of 2013, American CEO's made 354 times as much as the average worker, whereas Japanese CEO's made only 67 times as much as the average worker.

## **Solutions to the Problems**

### *Money Out of Politics*

In 2014, Princeton Professor Martin Gilens and Northwestern University Professor Benjamin Page published a study in which they determined, through quantitative analysis of 1,779 policy issues, that average Americans and organizations representing the interests of average Americans have virtually no influence over public policy at the national level.

Policy is dictated by large corporations, the super wealthy and the organizations and lobbyists who represent them, mostly due to the huge sums of money they are able to contribute, directly or indirectly, to political campaigns.

To end this institutionalized bribery, money must be removed from politics. A constitutional amendment must be passed to clarify once and for all that corporations are not human beings and that money is not speech.

There are significant efforts underway for such an amendment. Move to Amend is working toward pressuring Congress to introduce and pass such an amendment; while, Wolf PAC is an organization working to get enough state legislatures to call a constitutional convention to introduce and pass an amendment.

Media outlets that rent out our public airwaves for profit must provide free air time to election candidates, eliminating the need for candidates to buy advertising.

### *Reign in the Military Industrial Complex*

During WWII, Senator Harry Truman presided over the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, which investigated waste, inefficiency, and war profiteering. When Truman received word that a company might be engaged in such behavior, he would drive out and pay surprise visits to



the company. He would investigate aggressively and, according to The Nation, his work prompted President Franklin Roosevelt to support increasing “the excess profits tax to 90% and charg[ing] the Office of War Mobilization with the task of eliminating illegal profits.”

The Pentagon, which can't pass an audit and can't properly account for billions of dollars over the years, also routinely does business with defense contractors that have the most fraud and misconduct claims against them, such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing and KBR.

An independent commission should be impaneled to investigate war profiteering, waste, fraud and misconduct. The commission should have the authority and expectation to act on its findings rather than just issuing a report that will be ignored. An attitude that corporations that intentionally commit fraud and misconduct in relation to military contracts as well as lobbying to have American troops put in harm's way for wars that have nothing to do with defending the homeland would be considered unpatriotic at best and treasonous at worst. Political lobbying by military contractors should be outlawed and military personnel should go back to providing services for themselves such as cooking meals, cleanup and latrine duty.

A moratorium should be placed on any new military bases or expansion of existing ones. Gradual dismantling of military bases should follow based on the criteria of the necessity of defending the homeland. Simultaneously, there should be a halt to NATO expansion.

The U.S. should work with Europe and Russia toward a new, inclusive security architecture for Europe where the U.S. is a partner, not a dominator. This would eliminate the pretext of the U.S. needing to provide the majority of Europe's security.

The operations portion of the CIA should be dissolved as well as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Both of these organizations have a documented history of being too vulnerable to abuse by the Executive Branch outside of its constitutional mandate.

The money and arms faucet to Israel needs to be turned off. Washington should make it clear to Tel Aviv that Israel will no longer be indulged like a spoiled child with no responsibilities. The baton needs to be passed to other institutions and nations to broker a peace plan between Israel and Palestine. Russia, China, the U.N. or a combination thereof would be in a better position to do so.

*A Peace Dividend for the U.S.*

The money saved from the above measures could fund a New Deal type program to invest in renewable energy, obviating the “need” for wars over access to oil and gas, shipping lanes and pipelines. It could also provide other basic social infrastructure that would raise the American standard of living equivalent to the rest of the Western world.

We could also incentivize the re-industrialization of our economy toward the self-sufficient production of essential goods. Funding and tax policies could facilitate local food production and manufacturing. This would encourage food security, jobs that cannot be outsourced, increased environmental accountability and fair trade focused on surplus and non-essential goods.

## **Conclusion**

These are all policies that traditional Burkean conservatives and green-minded progressives can agree on: anti-imperialism, more economic self-sufficiency, energy independence, restoration of civil liberties and an end to corporate crony capitalism and its buying of the political system.

We must accept the fact that we are one country among many – a country that can still be a great nation – but we are not exceptional and we are not God. Such a belief stems from a cultural narrative deeply rooted in the particular brand of Calvinist/Puritan Protestantism that shaped the U.S. from its pioneer days. It has expressed itself through Manifest Destiny in the 19th century, “Leader of the Free World” against the “Evil Empire” in the 20th century, and the Exceptionalist/Indispensable Nation of the 21st century.

Most Americans will accept stepping down off this messianic pedestal if they have gained the true confidence that an increase in their standard of living would provide and if they are not manipulated and fed a constant diet of propaganda by politicians and corporate media on behalf of the interests of a craven and militaristic oligarchy.

Instead, Americans and their leaders would be working together to implement practical and concrete policies to improve Americans’ lives and foster the cooperation and stability in the international arena that will translate into genuine long-term security for the US.

Space must be provided for other regions and multilateral institutions to figure out how to restore stability. The rest of the world can figure out how to solve their own regional problems and govern themselves if given the space to evolve toward this goal. The world will not fall apart if the U.S. pulls back, gets its own house in order and endeavors to lead by example.

*\*\$350 billion was figured by taking the high end annual estimate for National*

*Renewable Energy Laboratory's "80% renewable by 2050," adding on an additional 20% and multiplying by 35 years.*

Natylie Baldwin is co-author of *Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard & How the West Was Checkmated*, available from Tayen Lane Publishing. In October of 2015, she traveled to 6 cities in the Russian Federation and has written several articles based on her conversations and interviews with a cross-section of Russians. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in various publications including Consortium News, Russia Insider, OpEd News, The New York Journal of Books, The Common Line, Santa Fe Sun Monthly, Dissident Voice, Energy Bulletin, Newtopia Magazine, and the Lakeshore. She blogs at [natyliesbaldwin.com](http://natyliesbaldwin.com). [An earlier version of this article first appeared at [OpEd News](#)]

---