

Will the Neocons' Long War Ever End?

America's Long War or Global War on Terror has taken some ugly turns as the West's continued war-making in the Muslim world leads to new terrorism against Western targets, with no end in sight, explains Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

The recent news from Kabul (in Afghanistan), from Manchester and London (in England), from Mosul (in Iraq), from Raqqa (in Syria), from Marib (in Yemen) and from too many devastated and traumatized communities to list makes it only too clear that the world is trapped in an unprecedented and intractable cycle of violence. And yet, incredibly, none of the main parties to all this violence are talking seriously about how to end it, let alone taking action to do so.

After 15 years of ever-spreading conflict has killed two to five million people, the main perpetrators are still getting away with framing their violence entirely as a response to the violence of their enemies. How much violence and chaos will the world accept before people start holding their own leaders morally and legally accountable for decisions and policies that predictably and repeatedly result in massive loss of life, cities reduced to rubble and shattered societies?

The neoconservative vision of a "Long War" or "generational conflict" to reshape the Middle East and other parts of the world has, in effect, created its own reality, as its proponents in the Bush II administration promised. The new crony-capitalist order they envisioned has taken root in places where entrenched ruling classes were already predisposed to it, like the Persian Gulf monarchies.

But wherever the would-be new rulers of the world – the U.S., NATO and the Arab royals – have made good on their threats to impose their new order by force, the results have only confirmed the soundness of the United Nations Charter's prohibition against the threat or use of force and the urgency of actually enforcing it.

An intelligent, legitimate response to the 9/11 attacks would have limited the use of force to what was strictly necessary and proportional and prosecuted its perpetrators and planners as criminals. But Al Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden, the hijackers and their accomplices gambled correctly on unwitting but decisive help from U.S. leaders who fell into the "war psychosis" that the scheme explicitly sought to provoke.

When the U.S. responded to a serious crime as an act of war, it granted Al Qaeda

the status of a belligerent that it sought in the eyes of alienated, marginalized Muslims across the world. The U.S. “war on terror” thus exploded the limited threat from a small group of jihadis scurrying between tenuous safe havens in Sudan and Afghanistan into a global franchise that the most expensive war machine ever built can only scatter and splinter farther and wider with every bomb, missile and “special operation” that it launches.

As a result, the greater Middle East is disintegrating into a patchwork of militarized apartheid states surrounded by devastated societies where militias rule and chaos reigns. Every day, U.S. warplanes kill hundreds of people with a hundred bombs and missiles in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Now U.S. leaders are contracting out the killing to new proxies. Saudi forces long dismissed as untrainable by Western military trainers – and armies of mercenaries recruited from Pakistan and elsewhere by Persian Gulf emirs – are committing a crime against humanity in Yemen, killing tens of thousands of civilians and threatening to plunge the poverty-stricken country into a famine that could kill millions. The brutality generates more and more desperate reactions.

The Sri Lanka model

In Sri Lanka, where I was born, rebel groups from the marginalized and oppressed Tamil minority adopted suicide bombing as a tactic and conducted 115 suicide attacks, including the assassinations of Sri Lankan President Premadasa and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Dharmalingam Siddarthan, one of the architects of the Tamils’ bombing campaign, explained the reasoning behind it to Mark Meadows, an American writer who went to Sri Lanka after the 9/11 attacks to try to understand the “terrorism” that was then a new phenomenon to Americans.

“Terrorism is simply targeting innocent people,” Siddarthan explained. “It is targeting people who have nothing to do with your struggle. You cannot convince them to join you, and you cannot convince the government to change. We decided that Sinhalese people had to understand our suffering. When we bring the war to Colombo, we are hitting economic targets. We are weakening the economy and making it feel our struggle. And by doing so we gain the attention that we need.”

Siddarthan eventually renounced violence, and is now a Member of Parliament for Jaffna.

In another interview for his book, Tea Time With Terrorists, Meadows spoke to Shankar Rajee, the mastermind of the first Tamil bombings in the capital,

Colombo, in 1984. Meadows asked Shankar Rajee, who had spent years on the CIA's "Most Wanted" list, what message he thought Al Qaeda tried to send by the 9/11 attacks.

"They wanted to point out that the Americans are insulated, that all that matters is their 'American way of life' and their living standards," Shankar Rajee told him. "Americans are not paying attention to the pain of the rest of the world. For the Americans, the end justifies the means. They do not care. But they hypocritically hold a high ground – a moral high ground – and cause the deaths of thousands of people to sustain their quality of life.."

"See, when you become a superpower, the arrogance with which you exercise that power should be considered. All the great empires and all the great powers of the world have perished because of arrogance."

The Sri Lankan civil war was in many ways the U.S. "Long War" in microcosm, pitting better-armed government forces against guerrilla fighters and suicide bombers. But the war took place on an island. Government forces eventually used overwhelming force to defeat the Tamil Tigers, also killing thousands of civilians in a final offensive that a U.N. official in Colombo described as a "bloodbath."

But the U.S. Long War is not taking place on an island. When U.S.-led assaults on cities like Fallujah, Mosul and Raqqa massacre enemy forces and thousands of civilians, they incite more anger and hatred, which then inspires new recruits to Al Qaeda or Islamic State in far-off, unexpected places across the world.

After doing this over and over again for 15 years, U.S. military and civilian leaders should have learned by now that they are just fueling and expanding the conflict.

But instead of fundamentally rethinking U.S. policy, our civilian and military leaders are still counting on propaganda or "information warfare" to evade accountability for systematic war crimes and to limit the political blowback from their military madness.

For example, the U.S. still calls the bombs and missiles it uses to blow people apart and reduce their homes to rubble "precision weapons." During the U.S. invasion of Iraq, an estimated 15 to 20 percent of these weapons missed their targets by at least 30 feet, but even when they are accurate, the U.S.'s smallest 500-pound bombs are designed to kill and maim across a blast radius that varies from 30 to 300 feet depending on what they hit.

As I wrote in *Blood On Our Hands*, "the impression created by the Centcom press

office and CNN that these weapons could be used to safely and surgically 'zap' one house in an urban area was an artful blend of propaganda and science fiction."

On the other side, Al Qaeda and Islamic State call their own most terrifying weapons, the suicidal murderers of nearly 3,000 people on 9/11 and young concert-goers in Manchester and Paris, "martyrs," identifying them with resistance fighters across the Muslim world and Muslim warriors throughout history.

'Constant Conflict'

Ironically, this kind of "information warfare" over language and imagery is exactly what American military planners expected and welcomed as they surveyed the post-Cold War world in the 1990s. But they overestimated their own ability to dominate it.

A 1997 military journal essay titled "Constant Conflict" by Major Ralph Peters is an example of the triumphalism that passed for realism in the halls of the post-Cold War Pentagon, and of the hypocrisy and arrogance that Shankar Rajee identified as motivating factors behind the 9/11 crimes:

"We have entered an age of constant conflict," Peters wrote. "Information is at once our core commodity and the most destabilizing factor of our time... Those of us who can sort, digest, synthesize, and apply relevant knowledge soar – professionally, financially, politically, militarily, and socially. We, the winners, are a minority.

"For the world masses, devastated by information they cannot manage or effectively interpret, life is 'nasty, brutish . . . and short-circuited.' The general pace of change is overwhelming, and information is both the motor and signifier of change. Those humans, in every country and region, who cannot understand the new world, or who cannot profit from its uncertainties, or who cannot reconcile themselves to its dynamics, will become the violent enemies of their inadequate governments, of their more fortunate neighbors, and ultimately of the United States. We are entering a new American century, in which we will become still wealthier, culturally more lethal, and increasingly powerful. We will excite hatreds without precedent..

"One of the defining bifurcations of the future will be the conflict between information masters and information victims..

"There will be no peace. At any given moment for the rest of our lifetimes, there will be multiple conflicts in mutating forms around the globe. Violent conflict will dominate the headlines, but cultural and economic struggles will

be steadier and ultimately more decisive. The de facto role of the US armed forces will be to keep the world safe for our economy and open to our cultural assault. To those ends, we will do a fair amount of killing. We are building an information-based military to do that killing.

“Societies that fear or otherwise cannot manage the free flow of information simply will not be competitive. They might master the technological wherewithal to watch the videos, but we will be writing the scripts, producing them, and collecting the royalties. Our creativity is devastating.”

Meanwhile, over at the State Department, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and then-First Lady Hillary Clinton were holding regular meetings with their staffs to map out the political and diplomatic policies that would support and justify the more aggressive and widespread use of military force being planned by the Pentagon.

In a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations during her 2000 Senate campaign, Clinton nailed her flag to the mast as a proponent of more aggressive and dangerous U.S. military interventions.

“There is a refrain,” Clinton declared, “that we should intervene with force only when we face splendid little wars that we surely can win, preferably by overwhelming force in a relatively short period of time. To those who believe we should become involved only if it is easy to do, I think we have to say that America has never and should not ever shy away from the hard task if it is the right one.”

During the question-and-answer period after Clinton’s speech, a banker in the audience presciently challenged her on the threat lurking behind her euphemistic rhetoric.

“I seem to hear that we should pay any price, bear any burden, to spread our way of life abroad,” he said. “I wonder if you think that every foreign country – the majority of countries – would actually welcome this new assertiveness, including the one billion Muslims that are out there? And whether or not there isn’t some grave risk to the United States in this – what I would say, not new internationalism, but new imperialism.”

Clinton quickly backtracked, calling his summation, “an extreme statement I do not subscribe to.” But, as Michael Crowley wrote in the *New Republic* when Clinton threw her helmet into the 2008 presidential race, this incident shed light on her controversial vote for the Iraq War resolution.

“What if the hawkish Hillary of 2002 wasn’t just motivated by political opportunism?” he asked. “What if she really believed in the war?”

How Will This End?

The American public is still debating these questions about how we got into this mess, who to blame for it, and who we can trust to deescalate this vicious cycle of war and terrorism. But U.S. information warfare has been more effective on the home front than against our enemies or our victims, keeping most Americans in near-total ignorance of the scale of our country's international violence.

Several months after an epidemiological survey found that about 600,000 Iraqis had been killed in the U.S.-led invasion and first three years of hostile military occupation in Iraq, the median response to a 2007 Pew poll that asked Americans how many Iraqis they thought had been killed was only 9,890, less than one sixtieth of that number.

The paradox of this crisis is that, on both sides, the deadly and tragic results of actual military operations and terrorism are offset by success in the information war that sustains them both. We are confronting a perfect storm in which successful information warfare enables leaders on all sides to avoid rethinking strategies and policies that lead only to more violence and bloodshed.

On the U.S. side, every city we bomb, every jihadi or civilian we kill, and every country we plunge into chaos becomes a rallying point to recruit more jihadis and generate more anti-U.S. resistance, often in surprising places. While American bombs and Iraqi death squads have been reducing much of West Mosul to rubble and killing thousands of its residents, the West's enemies have bombed Manchester; occupied Marawi, a city of 200,000 people in the Philippines; and conducted an unprecedented bombing in Kabul's fortified "green zone."

This is full-blown asymmetric warfare, and we would be foolish to think it cannot get much, much worse. But we should not let the asymmetry in the numbers killed or the weapons used to kill them obscure the overarching reality that the violence of each party to the conflict is fueling the violence of the other and thereby perpetuating this horrific cycle of violence.

On the other side, while Al Qaeda and now Islamic State have deftly exploited U.S. policies, which keep playing into their hands, they have failed in the main goals of terrorism as defined by Dharmalingam Siddarthan and Shankar Rajee in Sri Lanka. They have failed to either cripple the U.S. economy or to pierce the thick layers of consumerism and infotainment that insulate Americans from the pain of our victims.

'Successful' Propaganda

Just as Islamic State's propaganda continues to work well within many Muslim communities across the world, U.S. "information warfare" still works well on Americans. So the "war psychosis" is maintained and perpetuated on both sides.

But there are cracks in the U.S. propaganda war's hold over the allies whose support gives an important veneer of false legitimacy to U.S. war-making. When the U.K.'s opposition leader, Jeremy Corbyn, said that the U.K.'s role in U.S.-led military interventions was partly responsible for the Manchester bombing, he was roundly condemned by Prime Minister Theresa May, his opponent in the upcoming general election. But a YouGov opinion poll soon revealed that most of the public agreed with Corbyn.

In Germany, where the public has always opposed the U.S. Long War, Chancellor Angela Merkel is now running for reelection on the position that Europe (not just Germany) can no longer "rely" on the U.S. and U.K. Merkel now believes that "we Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands," and that that may mean improving relations with Russia as well as maintaining positive relations with the U.S. and U.K. France's new president, Emmanuel Macron, has already welcomed President Putin to Versailles and clearly agrees with Merkel.

President Trump's ignorant triumphalism will likely only widen these cracks in U.S.-led alliances. This is surely why the neocons greeted his election with such horror. Russiagate is the weapon they have chosen to counterattack with, but surely what they fear most is how Trump will undermine critical alliances with the U.K., Canada, Germany, France, Japan and other allies, as well as public perceptions of the U.S. all over the world.

Trump's withdrawal from the very weak, non-binding Paris agreement on climate change could signal the beginning of the end of the era when the United States could lead the world down whichever path that Washington chose, including destructive wars in the name of freedom and democracy.

After George W. Bush and his neocon wrecking-ball team alienated many U.S. allies and people everywhere with the Iraq War and the Global War on Terror, Barack Obama was favored by military-industrial power-brokers and other powerful interests to repair America's world image and to rebuild geopolitical alliances and win back international public opinion.

After Obama's largely successful charm offensive, the neocons were counting on Hillary Clinton to do the follow-on job of more aggressively advancing their agenda along now predictable and profitable lines. Trump's victory threw the mother of all monkey wrenches into their plans.

It is a general pattern in international politics that unstable regimes,

alliances and institutions sooner or later collapse and give way to new ones. As Shankar Rajee implied, what any great power should fear most is neither terrorism nor a great power rival but rather the consequences of its own hypocrisy and arrogance coming home to roost.

The nature of political change is that powerful new forces often build slowly beneath the surface and appear to be having little or no effect on existing power relations and structures, until the right catalyst releases their latent energy and new ideas, triggering a cascade of seemingly surprising changes.

Recent examples in U.S. politics have been movements for the \$15 minimum wage, gay marriage and criminal justice reform. The paradox of power is that the more that status quo interests or classes suppress new movements and ideas that threaten their dominance, the more they inadvertently fuel the pressures beneath the surface of the political system that are the preconditions for real democratic change.

The exact nature of the catalyst that could trigger a decisive transition in the balance of international power is almost impossible to predict, but there is no question that the pressures that are the precondition for such a shift have been building for some time. The U.S. government's resort to such widespread, illegal and escalating threats and uses of force, with no rational endpoint or exit strategy, is a symptom of a dominant power struggling to assert an authority that it no longer commands. We may in fact be living through a historic transition that has already passed its point of no return, but this will only become clear in hindsight.

The contradictions of the U.S. role in the world are becoming too dangerous and too obvious to the whole world to paper over with any amount of propaganda, consumerism and political games. The leaders of other nations and their citizens must now come to grips with the grave responsibilities of addressing the "American problem" and shepherding the world through a critical transition to a sustainable, just and peaceful future. If they do, many Americans will support them.

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