

# **The Wallpaper War**

**The United States a Decade After 9/11**

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## Introduction: A Dispatch from the Hyperpower

As the US enters yet another election cycle (though it is hard to say whether the US is ever not in election mode these days), it is worth interrogating the current state of the world's unipolar hyperpower – and of the foreign policy, red in tooth and claw, that affects us all.

I arrived in the USA on the eve of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, spent just over a month there, and left just after visiting the Occupy Wall Street sit-in on Columbus Day. Book-ended by these two great, emotive American commemorations, my visit to the US was the first I had made there in 27 years and I was very curious to see how things had changed since the Wild West heyday of Reaganomics.

Visiting as a teenager, albeit one from the side aligned with the West against the Soviet Bloc, I had been overwhelmed by the brash displays of American consumerism. I was, after all, visiting from the grey, razorwire-snarled frontlines, from a place not dissimilar, strangely enough, to East Germany (with their granite faces, black Hombergs and black suits with red lapel carnations, there was little visible or visceral difference between Erich Honecker and PW Botha). Accustomed to austerity, I was offended by Western waste, and by the hollow ostentation of what we would now call the “bling”.

But the Wall had long fallen and the world and I had changed unalterably. Born into war – the 1961 formation of the ANC's armed wing having preceded my birth by five years – and having expected peace with the end of that misnamed “Cold War” in which South African conscripts like myself had fought a hot war, partly a US proxy war, against Cuban, East German and Soviet-supplied armor in Angola, I had hoped the fall of apartheid and of the bipolar superpower world of which it was a relic to bring peace.

But the world of 2011 was a world of permanent warfare – and the USA was the prime progenitor, in thrall to the ascendancy of what had once been accurately identified by warmongering US President Lyndon B Johnson as “the military-industrial complex,” a useful shorthand for the agglomeration of corporations based on the oil and defence industries which often drive US foreign policy in a protectionist and sabre-rattling fashion.

As the days passed into weeks, I was impressed by the repeated references in the domestic media to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and to ongoing terrorism trials – references which, apart from a lone notice of the combat death in Helmand of a 22-year-old Marine from Asheville, in the mountains of North Carolina, seemed remote from the apparent calm of everyday American life, a wallpaper war that served as a frequently-referenced, but never quite real backdrop to daily dramas.

That calm proved deceptive, as demonstrated in particular by the internal wars being fought over cultural issues such as the profiling of Muslim Americans as automatic terrorist threats, President Barack Obama's reversal of the don't-ask-don't-tell policy on gays in the military, and Alabama's harsh new law on undocumented immigrants. This article will interrogate that dynamic tension, between a country perpetually at war abroad – and a voting populace at home who enable that warmaking in a context in which they are largely untouched by its effects.

## The Ghosts of Wars Past

The first thing that is important to recognise about the foreign policy of the United States of America is that it has a very specific history, or rather a national mythology that distinguishes it from other countries by the explicit nature of its revolutionary aims. The Revolutionary War established a unique republican state in the West, a reflection in part of the values of the French Revolution, but, isolated by the vast Atlantic, destined to pursue a path of its own. It is thus useful to consider the US state as an explicitly revolutionary state (albeit institutionalised in the Mexican sense of the word), with a national mythology which endows it with a sense of mission in the world. Comparable, though very different, states with expansionist missions driven by revolutionary myths would include Revolutionary France, the Soviet Union until its collapse, Nazi Germany, and post-apartheid South Africa today, with a ruling party explicitly dedicated to a “National Democratic Revolution”. The foreign policy and thus warmaking of Britain and the Netherlands, in contrast, despite having possessed globe-spanning pre-war empires, were never guided by anything similar to such political myths.

And because the US national institutional-revolutionary myth is rooted in an armed defence of its version of democratic values, its missionary zeal comes armed; in colonial times this would have meant Bible and black-powder; but now it involves Hollywood/Madison Avenue and US Air Force/CIA-operated Reaper hunter-killer drones. Despite its institutional-revolutionary sense of mission, my term describes the USA at the federal, collective level, and it is important to recognise that there remain significant, deep, historically-rooted regional differences between blocs of individual States – and not merely between the Old North and Old South, or between the East Coast and West Coast<sup>1</sup>.

Wherever one goes in the US, one finds evocations of the ghosts of wars past. There are innumerable Revolutionary War statues of alert musket-toting Minutemen, and unashamed tributes in the Southern States to the Confederate Army (the chapel at Duke University in North Carolina has statues of Confederate generals guarding its portico<sup>2</sup>). Less in evidence, unless one looks at the US Marine Corps Museum in Washington DC, are remembrances of American armed interventions in half of the developing world, though a current USMC recruiting pamphlet that I found on the Duke campus boasts: “More than two centuries of winning battles”.

But ubiquitous in the form of public memorials, is World War II which for the Baby-Boomer generation of US presidents prior to Obama was the revolutionary myth updated for the modern era: the shining democratic torch putting evil Nazism to flame and banishing it from the world stage.

The National World War II Museum in New Orleans is an intriguing installation whose curators are clearly trying to grapple honestly with an uncomfortable set of facts. In attempting to redress the imbalances of the past, displays examine the anti-Japanese racism of the US military alongside Japanese anti-Americanism, and sombrely examine the fire-bombing of Tokyo and the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – but stop short of describing these latter as the actual crimes

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<sup>1</sup> An erudite examination of the shifts in these regional dynamics since the height of the Vietnam War is given in Jeremy Black, *Altered States: America since the Sixties*, Reaktion Books, London, UK, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> It is 150 years since the North’s still-controversial “Restoration” of the South following the Civil War, which critics call the imposition by force of alien values on Southerners, and an argument was raging during my visit in one North Carolina town about whether to restore to its place of public prominence a Confederate statue damaged in a van accident.

against humanity they were, for it is, I assume, considered morally impossible for an institutional-revolutionary democracy to admit to having committed genocide.

Vietnam is of course the other war that is indelibly imprinted on the modern American conscience, though for very different reasons: there, the enemy was evil Communism, but the torch of democracy sputtered and died in Saigon, a failure that continues to define the Left and haunt the Right. A 10 October New York Times op-ed piece called Vietnam a ghost that dogged Obama's war policy; meanwhile the "Wall of Healing" Vietnam Memorial – a mobile miniature of the long black marble wall inscribed with names of the dead at The Mall in Washington – travelled the country, affording far-flung veterans the opportunity to mourn their lost youth.

## **The Globalisation of War Today**

Any commentator on American affairs worth their salt has noted the echoes in the American psyche of the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in the 2001 "9/11" attacks in New York City and Washington: both were rare, massive attacks on US soil that shook a complacent, inward-looking populace to its core and forced them to re-examine the world outside. Conspiracy theorists claim that Pearl Harbour's "day that will live in infamy" had in fact not proven so long-lived, had faded in the public mind, and that a cynical cabal within the military-industrial complex orchestrated 9/11 as a pro-war motivational spectacular. I'm not going to pronounce on that – aside from noting that the abysmal pseudo-documentary *Zeitgeist*, so beloved of the Left, in fact clearly originates with the paranoid American Right. What is true, however, is that the direct effect of 9/11 was to breathe new life into the American institutional-revolutionary mission abroad.

Recognisable chunks of the aircraft engines and landing gear debris from 9/11 are displayed in shafts of light as holy relics at the Newseum in Washington, the centerpiece of a sort of stations-of-the-cross hagiography of the FBI's role in American internal affairs. That very day, the nation's front-page news in just about every newspaper celebrated the killing by Reaper drone of alleged Al-Qaeda leader in Yemen, Abu Ali Al-Harithi. The socio-political aftermath of 9/11 was ever-present.

I walked to the 9/11 Ground Zero memorial building site in New York City – which is still partly a big construction site, a decade after the event – and took photographs in a local diner of a score of firemen who had lost their lives that day, a reminder of the intimate, emotional drivers behind the Iraqi and Afghan Wars; the widening ripples of the seemingly perpetual "War on Terror":

- Pakistan: I visited the US Navy Memorial in Washington which lauds the SEALs whose Team 6 killed Osama bin Laden last year. Interestingly enough, former Obama Press Secretary Robert Gibbs had admitted at a talk that I attended at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that the SEALs had gone into Pakistan with orders to kill not capture and bring to trial Osama bin Laden, in line with the Nuremburg principles which the US had such a leading role in establishing. This embrace of extrajudicial action is more than adequately demonstrated by the "extraordinary renditions" (kidnapping) of terror suspects to Guantanamo and other detention facilities – and their treatment once there, something that Obama promised and failed to rectify.

- Iraq: I listened to former CBS Iraq correspondent turned Associated Press intelligence writer Kimberly Dozier, who was seriously injured in a car-bombing in Baghdad in 2006 which killed her driver and the US serviceman she was travelling with, speak on how investigative journalists in the wake of 9/11 navigate the disinformation minefields laid by intelligence agents. With the very reasons for the Iraq War incontrovertibly shown to be bogus, investigative journalists were increasingly called on to negotiate these minefields on behalf of a public that prefers its information stripped down to near-meaningless sound-bites and tweets.
- And back home in America: a visit to the Washington Post was notable for my guide, the Ombudsman, talking about how the newspaper had been forced to adopt a sophisticated mail-handling system to neutralise anthrax, or other attacks by mail; in some respects, the chickens had come home to roost. Later, I visited the colourful yet calm Occupy Wall Street sit-in in New York City on the on the contested anniversary of “Columbus Day”, a foundational part of the American myth, with its prevailing anti-war sentiment, where a former US Marine made a name for himself on television by defending protestors attacked by the police, saying that he had not fought abroad to defend police brutality at home. But the characterisation by so many people I spoke to of the Occupy Movement as “revolutionary” shows how far removed from reality is their understanding of the balance of forces in their own society.

It is clear to me that Americans, being unaccustomed to protest that does more than merely “speak truth to power,” with their organised working class long since domesticated and integrated into the relative benefits of the system (even though it is largely the poor and working class that forms the bulk of its footsoldiers<sup>3</sup>), have no real notion of how to grasp the nettle of power much beyond the ritual of voting or abstaining. So, despite this marginal domestic dissent, with the “borders” of the US now considered strategically to be located at the frontlines in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Colombia, Jamaica and elsewhere, the war has clearly been successfully globalised by the military-industrial complex. So the question then, was: what was the effect of being perpetually at war with the world mean to the American people themselves?

## Homegrown Hate

It would be disingenuous to suggest that America’s threats all originated with foreign devils; after all, the 1995 Oklahoma Bombing was clearly a homegrown affair, committed by outriders of the persistent ultra-Right tendency within the American body politic which on the one hand takes America’s founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution with its early Amendments (including the right to bear arms) literally as the word of God, interpreted in a racial-nativist manner, while on the other hand seditiously attempts to strip the American Revolution of its ossified aspects (including federal institutions such as the Federal Reserve Bank), desiring a return to a presumed purer, original Revolution in which the county

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<sup>3</sup> A great cultural reference for the desperation that drives the poor into the US military, which offers them not only employment but the chance to get bursaries to study, is the harrowing film *Winter’s Bone*, starring Jennifer Lawrence, directed by Debra Granik, screenplay by Granik and Anne Rosellini, USA, 2010.

sheriff is the highest authority, taxation is abolished, and a rugged autonomous individualism prevails<sup>4</sup>.

In order to understand domestic terrorism, in New Orleans, I listened to Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC) intelligence project director Heidi Beirich speak on the demographic and economic drivers behind the rise of domestic hate groups. The SPLC was founded in 1981 and has carved out a niche for itself as a key provider of intelligence on, and interdictor of, hate groups ranging from Neo-Nazis and the Klan, to the Nation of Islam and Radical Traditional Catholics, though two-thirds of them are white-supremacist, with 602 white nationalist groups in 2000, rising to more than 1,000 today.

Beirich said there was a “frightening” proliferation of hate groups over the past decade, since 9/11, and especially since Obama’s election: while the FBI claimed about 800 hate crimes were committed each year; the Bureau of Justice Statistics put the figure at 200,000/year.

Few hate groups are specifically anti-gay, and yet the reversal of the “don’t-ask-don’t-tell” policy on gays in the military erupted into the mainstream during my visit, with Republican politicians in a TV debate totally ignoring a question posed by an openly gay soldier via video-feed from Afghanistan – despite the fact that he was clearly serving his country on the frontline – while in North Carolina, legislative opposition to gay marriage was the big culture-war issue of the day. And although few hate groups are focused exclusively on the anti-immigration cause, the drastically changed ethnic demography of the US was a clear driver of hate: in 1970, Beirich said, the US population was 83% white; but that figure had dropped to 66% today; and by 2050, the white population was predicted to fall under 50%.

Fears of being culturally overwhelmed by assimilation-resistant non-whites lay behind the controversial new immigration law, passed in Alabama while I was there, which made it a criminal offence to be found to be an undocumented immigrant in the state. The law was passed despite the fact that it was targeted at a tiny population of only 130,000 out of 4.7-million Alabama residents. The day it was passed, weird scenes unfolded as scores of immigrant families fled the state, leaving keys to homes with sympathetic neighbours and hungry dogs roaming the streets.

A second key driver of hate was the parlous state of the economy after the sub-prime housing boom imploded and the banks responsible were bailed out by the taxpayer victims; this, against a backdrop of longer-term deindustrialisation which has seen factory capacity relocate to under-unionised developing countries, leaving former industrial cities such as Detroit transformed into eerie wastelands, with vacant lots, boarded hotels, looted doctors’ surgeries, vandalised concert halls, and abandoned apartments with food rotting in the fridges<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> A good exposition of the root elements and flowering of this ultra-Right is James Coates, *Armed and Dangerous: the Rise of the Survivalist Right*, Hill and Wang, New York City, USA, 1995. Coates repeatedly mentions, but seemingly fails to appreciate, the poverty which drove many of those he describes into extremism; perhaps this is why many ultra-Right themes in America are shared by the ultra-Left. Given that Coates’s book is outdated, being a reprint of a 1987 text, an update on the religious ultra-Right is provided by Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: the Christian Right and the War on America*, Vintage, London, UK, 2008. There was a restricted gathering of such ultra-Right groups in the Appalachian Mountains during my trip.

<sup>5</sup> For a chilling photographic essay on Detroit’s decline, take a look at Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s work online at [www.marchandmeffre.com](http://www.marchandmeffre.com). Detroit was where the alleged “Underwear Bomber” stood trial during my visit, while Michigan state was home to a man arrested for planning to fly radio-controlled model aircraft armed with bombs into the Pentagon and the US Capitol.

And lastly, the election of the first black president – an initially successful attempt by the US oligarchy to divert attention from the bailout of the banks – provoked an ultra-Right backlash that resonated beyond its usual backwoods militia bunkers: grade-schoolers on an Oklahoma bus were reported recently to have chanted “Assassinate Obama!”

And yet, Beirich noted, Muslims rather than the domestic ultra-Right have borne the brunt of investigations. An example of this Islamophobia was an instructor at the FBI base at Quantico, Virginia, who told his trainees that if a citizen was Muslim and religious, they were automatically suspect, and that the Qu’ran had come to Mohammed in an epileptic fit; trainees complained, the instructor was removed and all FBI training materials on religion and culture are currently under review. To interrogate this further, I attended debate at Duke on “the Radicalisation of Muslims in America.”

## Muslims in America

Setting the scene by saying that the profiling of Muslims was out of proportion to the actual threat they represented, Prof Charles Kurzman of the University of North Carolina, said: “About 20 individuals per year are suspects, with no identifiable ethnic or citizenship profile. Most plots are disrupted before they acquire their materials or select their targets – and one this year was a Shi’ite planning an attack on a Sunni mosque. There have been only 35 murders [in the US] associated with Muslims since 9/11 – out of 150,000 murders a year. Since 2008, there have been 700,000 murders world-wide of which only 15,000 deaths have been associated with Muslim terrorism – excluding Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The world is safer from terrorism than at any time since the 1970s.”

Kurzman went on to quote two recent surveys of public opinion in America, the one on Islam, in which half the respondents had positive attitudes, and the other on Muslims, in which 66% had positive attitudes. This, he said, indicated that while most Americans were ambivalent about the religion, most were also warmly disposed towards “real, living people,” their Muslim neighbours.

Prof David Schanzer, director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, an institute with direct intelligence community involvement, responded in similar vein, saying that the sample of home-soil American Muslim terror threats was “so small that it is difficult to do retroactive causal analysis. The fairest answer to why Muslims are radicalising is: we don’t know. There is no profile of the ‘homegrown terrorist’.” The claim that religiosity drove radicalism was “not true, and discredited by many studies: out of the 188 individuals in the data-set, some never became pious at all; one’s grievance was related to an uncle killed in an American drone attack,” he said, hinting that the intimate impact of US foreign policy was a factor. Kurzman said that in recent “Homeland Security closed sessions,” it had been noted that many radical bloggers had, in fact, little knowledge of Islam.

Schanzer referred to a 2008 debate in the New York Times between Dr Marc Sageman who stressed “self-radicalising individuals” and Bruce Hoffman who stressed organised recruitment by terrorists in the US<sup>6</sup>, saying “There are many pathways to radicalisation.” Asked whether he

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<sup>6</sup> Sageman is a former CIA operative based in Pakistan in 1987–1989, now anti-terrorism consultant, and author of *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, USA, 2008. Hoffman is Director of the Center for Peace and Security Studies at Georgetown University, a specialist in terrorism and counter-insurgency, editor-in-chief of *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and the series editor of *Columbia*



thought mental illness played any role, Kurzman said: “Many of these individuals are isolated from their communities; these lone wolves are not weeded out. But recruited terrorists weed out psychotics because they are considered too unstable to be effective.”

Imam Abdullah Antepli, the Duke Muslim Chaplain, a fiery yet moderate Muslim of Turkish extraction who conducts theological training for young imams in Afghanistan, laid the blame directly at the door of the US’s creation of proxy armed forces abroad: “The historical roots of this lie in Afghanistan in the 1980s. I remember the US back then idealising the same people we are chasing now. Our tax money played an extensive role in creating this cancer; we created this monster by our support for the Mujaheddin and we can trace the ideological hotbed of US Muslim extremism to our relationship to the Saudi regime... Religious money is exporting poison.” Kurzman responded, however, that “in the US, only a handful of suspects are connected to Saudi- or Middle East-funded outfits; terrorist attacks are cheap and you don’t need Saudi money.”

In terms of Muslim voting patterns, especially in the swing states of Florida, Ohio and Michigan, where there are concentrations of Muslim voters: studies showed a total US Muslim population, mostly Sunni, of 2.75-million – 45% of whom had entered the US in the past 25 years – of whom about 1.5-million were of voting age; although they tended to vote 70% Democrat, 11% Republican, and the rest Independent, there was no “Muslim vote” per se as the putative “community” was fractured by race, ethnicity, class and country of origin and they tended to vote in synch with their neighbours.

So while cultural wars over gays and immigrants, homegrown hate, and Muslim terrorism vexes Homeland Security, they should weigh very little in the scales – and yet are accorded disproportional importance as a threat partly justifying US gunboat diplomacy.

## The Shape of Future War

What will a future American-lead perpetual war look like? If the Republicans can be believed, when (for it is only a matter of time) they reacquire the Oval Office, it seems we are in for “Intervention Lite,” a return to a form of 1930s isolationism, but with very targeted penetrations abroad – not unlike, perhaps the (failed) 1927–1932 combat in Nicaragua against Augusto Sandino’s “Light and Truth” liberated zone.

According to Prof Charles Hermann, of the conservative Bush School of Government and Public Service in Texas<sup>7</sup>, the ideal “over-the-horizon” military policy of a future Republican administration (and thus of NATO as well) involved strategic support for regimes that were prepared to hold regular elections, in order to prevent them spiraling downwards into failed states. Hermann asked whether the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, nominally to prevent human rights

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*Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare*. Their debate is outlined in “A Not Very Private Feud Over Terrorism”: [www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/weekinreview/08sciolino.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/weekinreview/08sciolino.html).

<sup>7</sup> Why focus on the Republicans only here? We know how a Democrat regime currently wages war and we can expect more of the same if Obama wins; while the recession has clearly altered Republican objectives since the Bush era. I also met with representatives of the American constructivist far Right, and constructivist far Left, by which I distinguish them from the demolitionist terrorist ultras of both stripes: the Libertarian Party on the Right is minimum-state, minimum-war capitalist; the North-Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists (NEFAC) on the Left argued for an anti-war decentralist community control of the economy. The Libertarian Party has a marginal electoral showing (4% in the 2008 Presidential elections) and NEFAC had just split into revolutionary and moderate projects. But despite the intriguing arguments both sides could mount, they are both too far from the levers of power in America to have any impact on how, let alone whether, the US wages war.

abuses against the rebels by the regime, had not been its last hurrah, suggesting that if British and French defence spending continued at current levels, those two US allies would be unable to stage a repeat of Libya.

But the US, despite itself being hit by financial crisis, recession and a soaring national debt at 90% of GDP, driven by the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the Department of Defence's \$675-billion/year budget had ballooned by 80% since 9/11. Hermann said that some of this defence spending was given flight by scare-mongering over the intentions of China, North Korea and Iran, but he felt that these were overstated: "I see this as a management problem, as they are running countries and are interested in staying in power."

Hermann quoted Robert Gates, former Defense Secretary under President George W Bush and now Dean of the Bush School, saying that "fractured or failing states are the main security threat of our times," adding that Oxford economist Prof Paul Collier noted that there was a remarkable overlap between failed states and the "bottom billion" of the world's poor, resulting in bad governments and recurrent coups (Mali in West Africa, which has recently experienced a coup as I write this, is the third-poorest nation on earth).

So how would a Republican-run military-industrial complex wage war, via NATO in particular? Hermann recommended an "over-the-horizon" support role: "We're not trying to overthrow bad governments [à-la Iraqi "regime change"]; we're providing security for good governments – the reverse of [NATO policy in] Bosnia-Herzegovina – if you develop and allow free and fair elections." So the bottom billion will be left to rot, but what would NATO do about bad governments like Syria? "If they don't get on board, we leave them alone. I don't think we have the resources, and to be honest, the political will, to overthrow the bad guys." On the other hand, support for "good governments," based on contracts with client states which would involve grooming the younger, upwardly-mobile middle officer castes, could embrace African states such as Nigeria and Kenya – to prevent the spread of the Arab Spring south of the Sahara, Hermann said.

Precisely what impact the global economic crisis will have on American military strategy in future is far from clear, however. Take, for instance, the remarkable way in which the Pentagon views itself. I managed to secure access to this enormous complex of 23,500 workers (top-heavy with brass: 70% of the military staff are officers) with its Humvee-wide corridors and its courtyard Ground Zero Café above which any future enemy ICBMs would detonate dead-centre, having recognised the building's unique geometry incoming from space, as a journalist, not a civilian, which perhaps explains the following.

Bryan Whitman, the Principal Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs<sup>8</sup>, had just expounded on how the US military operated globally, across all time-zones, underscoring the unusual degree of personal latitude allowed by the Pentagon to its regional commanders, whose six regional combatant commands divide the Earth like segments of a giant orange: "We plan centrally and operate decentrally, so the field commanders have a lot of autonomy. The ambassadors [under the State Department] focus on their own country [of posting] but the commanders [under the Pentagon] look at regional security<sup>9</sup>."

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<sup>8</sup> Whitman's official bio is online at [www.defense.gov/bios/biographydetail.aspx?biographyid=212](http://www.defense.gov/bios/biographydetail.aspx?biographyid=212).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the new Africa Command (Africom) has now calved off European Command (Eucom), which covers Europe and North Africa, because Sub-Saharan Africa is geopolitically detached from North Africa and Europe. Africom is still headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, and has yet to find a home in Africa, though Ghana and South Africa are contenders. Africom is the aegis for the Africa-dedicated components of the US Air Force, US Marine Corps,

I responded that seeing as how the US military had this enormous 24-hour global presence, with its own state-like infrastructure (housing, engineering, social services, etc), massive staff and facilities (some ZIP codes are those floating cities called aircraft carriers), and heavily-armed semi-autonomous regional forces, and given that the military officer caste was largely unaffected by changes in whichever political party rotated through the White House and therefore could devise longer-term strategies than the State Department whose foreign policy was bound to the incumbent Presidency – given all that, was the US military not in fact a parallel world government?

Whitman gave me a long, penetrating look, and then said “I think you have answered your own question” – which to me was a remarkably frank admission from the senior ranks about how the military-industrial complex viewed itself superior to the elected Presidency<sup>10</sup>.

The implication of this in Africa, was implied by Pentagon spokesman and legal expert David Oten who said direct military-to-military co-operation was often one of the best ways for the US to engage diplomatically “because often the [African] military is the only centre of national power – there is no strong legislature, etc.”

In sum, I suspect that the Whitmans of the Pentagon will prevail over the Hermanns or whoever of the foreseeable-future White House. But it would be a mistake to cartoon the Whitmans as boorish hawks committed to bombing-for-profit; on the contrary, his caste are sophisticated navigators of the brave new world: “Just because CNN, etcetera asks me a question, how should I rank that against a guy who runs a blog in Bolivia that covers all of Latin America and that everyone reads?”

Lieutenant-Colonel Todd Brasseale, former spokesman for NATO’s International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) and now the Pentagon spokesperson on Western Hemisphere policy, detainee affairs (including Guantanamo) and US Southern Command (Mexico-to-Antarctica), was even more disarming, describing ex-Marine turned Al Jazeera journalist Josh Rushing who resigned from the military after being ordered by the Pentagon not to speak to the media about his experiences managing information flow during the Iraq War, as “a revolutionary, a young, thinking officer who was engaging at a time of war. The Marines froze him out and treated him so poorly; he quit on principle – a very valid principle – and now runs the brilliant show Front Lines,” which covers the impact of US foreign policy in the Americas. “Now the Marine Corps has him speak to them about their mistakes. That’s progress.”

I had met Rushing the day before and he was honestly described. But before we are too charmed, here is that language again: the institutional-revolutionary mission of America in waging war abroad.

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and Special Operations (based in Germany), US Navy and US Army (based in Italy), and the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (based at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti).

<sup>10</sup> Beyond the Presidency’s considerable powers, including the President’s as commander-in-chief of all US armed forces, there exist three large, yet less visible and mostly unaccountable and unelected centres of power in the US: firstly the military-industrial complex itself; secondly the state bureaucracy, one of the world’s largest and most powerful, which, like the military-industrial complex, has its own strategic foreign interests separate to those of the incumbent Presidency and which because it is likewise unelected has longer tenure in office and thus longer-range objectives than incumbent parties; and lastly the plutocracy, the wealthy old-boys’ club of lobbyists from Washington, Silicon Valley, Houston and elsewhere who push their own private agenda, including the US-supremacist “Project for an American Century.”

## Conclusion: Perpetual Institutional-Revolutionary War?

So, what to make of a country where the home front is so apparently placid that walls around homes are a rarity, and car crashes rate high on state-wide news programmes – and yet which wages war across a globe it considers its own? For one thing, the 1823 Monroe Doctrine that treated Latin America as the back-yard of the US, providing the rationale for interventions everywhere from Argentina to Cuba, has clearly long been updated to embrace the whole post-Soviet world.

Regarding the American public's investment in this vision, Breasseale estimated that "less than 1% have some involvement with the military, but the American people spend a lot of money on defence. Every time we lose someone in combat, we put out a press release, because we don't want to ever hide the true cost – in blood."

That's all very well, but it implies a deep level of disconnection between where and why American blood is spilled, and the populace who politically enable their youth to go off and fight obscure battles. And I'm not sure I agree with Breasseale: the presence of the military is hard to avoid in American civilian life. From the National Guard recruiting at the Society of Professional Journalists' annual conference – of all things! – to the almost unquestioned presence on college campuses of students in uniform and of Reserve Officer Training Corps recruiters (the 1970 Kent State Shootings are a distant memory), from a Medal of Honor recipient opening the New York Stock Exchange, to the returnees greeted at airports by girls wearing military-groupie T-shirts, from the steady trickle of bodies coming home through the giant military morgue at Dover, to the veteran-themed country fairs, it is obvious that the military is a permanent yet strangely under-recognised feature of American civilian consciousness.

The US just doesn't feel like a country at war. And yet, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert "Disaster Bob" Ditchey, a Secretary of Defense spokesman who holds the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) portfolio for the US, Canada and Mexico, co-ordinating DHS, US Northern Command (US and Canada), and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD, the joint US-Canadian aerospace defence system), told me that on Obama's initiative, 1,200 National Guardsmen were now helping police the border with Mexico; clearly even the Obama regime had felt the need to respond militarily to the widespread domestic fears of illegal immigration run out of control. Clearly, whether Republican or Democrat, "keeping things down on the farm" by force of arms is still considered a domestic political necessity.

It also needs to be stressed that the supposedly kinder, gentler Obama regime (in 2007, before attaining office, Obama renounced the first-strike use of nuclear weapons) has also embarked on the largest-ever refurbishment and expansion of America's nuclear warfare capacity, a programme that will run for several decades after Obama retires<sup>11</sup>. This is clear evidence of an incumbent president serving the longer-range interests of the military-industrial complex rather than even his own party's medium-term interests.

When I visited the US last, it was the year 1984 and many people were throwing parties mocking George Orwell's great dystopian novel 1984, saying smugly to each other, "see how wrong he was?" But they missed the point: the totalitarian hyperpower Oceania of Orwell's tale draws its legitimacy from its geopolitical backdrop: a far-off, possibly fake, yet endless war with their seamlessly alternating enemies, Eurasia and Eastasia. I had the eerie sense on this visit, 27 years

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<sup>11</sup> See Darwin Bond-Graham, "Obama's Worst Sell-out?", *Counter-punch*, USA, September 23–25, 2011.

later, that a substantial part of the US citizenry themselves had become pilotless drones, operating against a backdrop of a far-off war that, like the citizenry of Oceania, left them physically unaffected – but which yet required their ideological acquiescence.

The great French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1840 in his landmark work *Democracy in America*: “No protracted war can fail to endanger the freedom of a democratic country... it must invariably and immeasurably increase the powers of civil government, it must compulsorily concentrate the direction of all men and the management of all things in the hands of the administration. If it does not lead to despotism by sudden violence, it prepares men for it more gently by their habits.”

A unipolar hyperpower, its citizenry gently prepared by a perpetual war that is more wallpaper to their daily habits than painful first-hand experience, for the concentration not of the powers of civil government – but of the powers of a military-industrial caste erudite yet far more seditious of elected democracy than any on the political fringes, armed with world-ending weaponry and a messianic sense of revolutionary right and unassailable mission, such a power has as much potential to be a long-term destabilising, as well as stabilising, factor on the world stage.

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Michael Schmidt  
The Wallpaper War  
The United States a Decade After 9/11  
June 14, 2012

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