

Bracing Views – Making Sense of a Vexing and Perplexing World

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The American Military Uncontained

W.J. Astore

In my latest article for TomDispatch.com, I detail how the U.S. military is out everywhere but winning nowhere. What I mean by not winning is the military's failure to end wars on terms remotely favorable to national security and the interests of democracy. I hesitate to be a cynic, but perpetual war does mean perpetual high "defense" budgets and prolonged and prodigious power for generals (and retired generals). Peace would mean smaller defense budgets and far less influence for these men.

What chance of peace with President Trump in charge surrounded by the generals of all these losing wars? Indeed, generals continue to speak of generational wars, so much so that I'm tempted to make a play on words: *generational wars generated by generals*. It's not entirely fair, nor is it entirely unfair.

Anyway, here's an excerpt from my article. You can read it in its entirety at TomDispatch.com.

When it comes to the "world's greatest military," the news has been shocking. Two fast US Navy ships [colliding with slow-moving commercial vessels](#) with tragic loss of life. An Air Force that has been in the air continuously for years and yet [doesn't have enough pilots](#) to fly its combat jets. Ground troops who find themselves fighting "rebels" in Syria previously armed and trained [by the CIA](#). Already [overstretched Special Operations](#) forces [facing growing demands](#) as their rates of mental [distress and suicide](#) rise. Proxy armies in Iraq and Afghanistan that [are unreliable](#), often delivering [American-provided weaponry](#) to [black markets](#) and into the hands of various enemies. All of this and more coming at a time when defense spending is once again soaring and the [national security state](#) is awash in funds to the tune of nearly a [trillion dollars](#) a year.

What gives? Why are highly maneuverable and sophisticated naval ships colliding with lumbering cargo vessels? Why is an Air Force that exists to fly and fight short 1,200 pilots? Why are US Special Operations forces deployed everywhere and winning nowhere? Why, in short, is the US military fighting itself — and losing?

It's the Ops Tempo, Stupid

After 16 years of a never-ending, ever-spreading global war on terror, alarms are going off in Asia from the Koreas and Afghanistan to the Philippines, while across the Greater Middle East and Africa the globe's "last superpower" is in a never-ending set of conflicts with a range of minor enemies few can even keep straight. As a result, America's can-do military, committed piecemeal to a bewildering array of missions, has increasingly become a can't-do one.

Too few ships are being deployed for too long. Too few pilots are being worn out by incessant patrols and mushrooming [drone](#) and [bombing](#) missions. Special Operations forces (the "[commandos of everywhere](#)," as Nick Turse calls them) are being deployed to far too many countries — more than two-thirds of the nations on the planet already this year — and are involved in conflicts that hold little promise of ending on terms favorable to Washington.



Ike had it right: Beware the military-industrial complex

Meanwhile, insiders like retired Gen. David Petraeus speak calmly about “[generational struggles](#)” that will essentially never end. To paraphrase [an old slogan](#) from ABC’s *Wide World of Sports*, as the US military spans the globe, it’s regularly experiencing the agony of defeat rather than the thrill of victory.

To President Donald Trump (and so many other politicians in Washington), this unsavory reality suggests an obvious solution: [boost military funding](#); [build more navy ships](#); train more pilots and give them more incentive pay to stay in the military; rely more on drones and other technological “force multipliers” to compensate for tired troops; [cajole allies](#) like the Germans and Japanese to spend more on their militaries; and [pressure proxy armies](#) like the Iraqi and Afghan security forces to cut corruption and improve combat performance.

One option — the most logical — is never seriously considered in Washington: to make deep cuts in the military’s operational tempo by decreasing defense spending and downsizing the global mission, by bringing troops home and keeping them there. This is not an isolationist plea. The United States certainly faces challenges, notably from Russia (still a major nuclear power) and China (a global economic power bolstering its regional military strength). North Korea is, as ever, posturing with missile and nuclear tests in provocative ways. Terrorist organizations strive to destabilize American allies and cause trouble even in “the homeland.”

Such challenges require vigilance. What they don’t require is more ships in the sea lanes, pilots in the air and boots on the ground. Indeed, 16 years after the 9/11 attacks it should be obvious that [more of the same](#) is likely to produce yet more of what we’ve grown all too accustomed to: increasing instability across significant swaths of the planet, as well as the rise of new terror groups or new iterations of older ones, which means yet more opportunities for failed US military interventions ...

The Greatest Self-Defeating Force in History?

Incessant warfare represents the end of democracy. I didn’t say that, [James Madison](#) did.

I firmly believe, though, in [words borrowed from President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), that “only Americans can hurt America.” So how can we lessen the hurt? By beginning to rein in the military. A standing military exists — or rather should exist — to support and defend the Constitution and our country against immediate threats to our survival. Endless attacks against inchoate foes in the backlands of the planet hardly promote that mission. Indeed, the more such attacks wear on the military, the more they imperil national security.

A friend of mine, a captain in the Air Force, once quipped to me: you study long, you study wrong. It’s a sentiment that’s especially cutting when applied to war: you wage war long, you wage it wrong. Yet as debilitating as they may be to militaries, long wars are even more devastating to democracies. The longer our military wages war, [the more our country is militarized](#), shedding its democratic values and ideals.

Back in the Cold War era, the regions in which the US military is now slogging it out were once largely considered “the shadows” where John le Carré-style secret agents from the two superpowers matched wits in a set of shadowy conflicts. Post-9/11, “[taking the gloves off](#)” and seeking knockout blows, the US military entered those same shadows in a big way and there, not surprisingly, it often couldn’t sort friend from foe.

A new strategy for America should involve getting out of those shadowy regions of no-win war. Instead, an expanding US military establishment continues to compound the strategic mistakes of the last 16 years. Seeking to dominate everywhere but winning decisively nowhere, it may yet go down as the greatest self-defeating force in history.

Mom’s Wisdom on Religion

W.J. Astore

Today, I want to share a bracing view, courtesy of my mother. She converted to Catholicism (from Protestantism) when she married my dad, but she wasn’t much of a church-goer. When my dad suggested she should accompany

him to mass on Sundays, she had a telling rejoinder:

You worry about your soul — I'll worry about mine.



That's mom, circa 1950

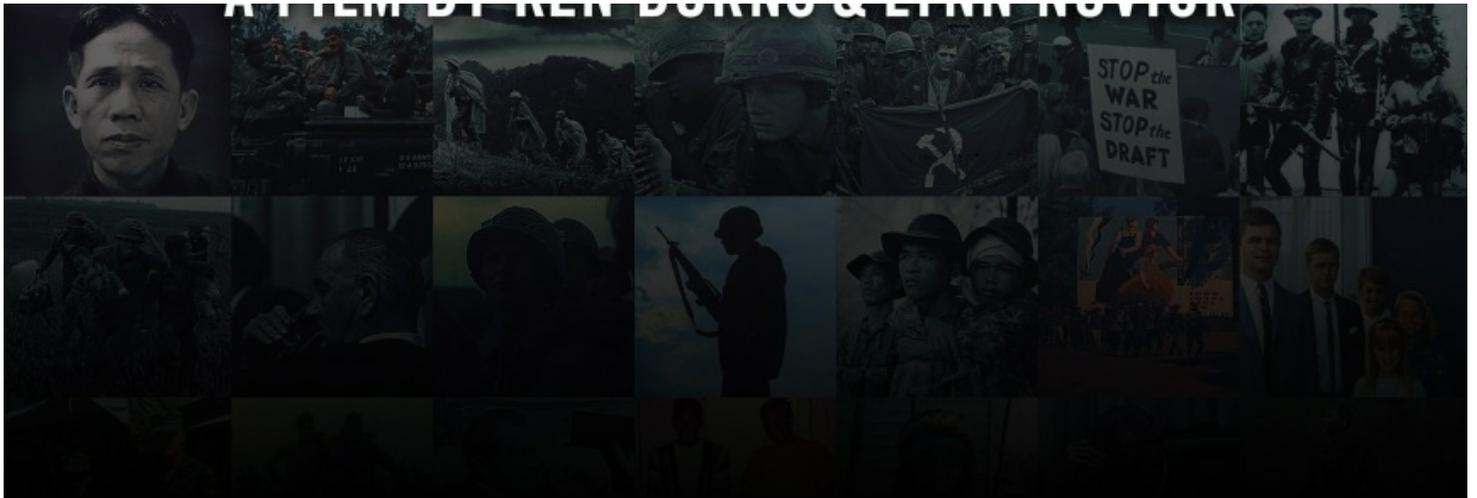
Excellent advice. Mom had a way of speaking that cut to the chase.

When it comes to religion, too many Americans seek to push their beliefs on others. And often there's some guilt or a veiled threat in the push. "A good person goes to church." "These are holy days of obligation." "You should go to set a good example for the kids." "Don't forget judgment day — God is looking down on you right now."

My mom was having none of that. She also didn't need church to do the right thing. She was kind and generous and, in my opinion, followed the example of the Gospel without making airs about it.

When it comes to religion, few people want to be pushed into attending "mandatory" practices. Indeed, I've always liked Christ's teachings on praying to God in private, rather than standing on a street corner and shouting your beliefs to the masses. Speaking of which, I once witnessed a man doing exactly that in Oxford, England, shouting on the street, proclaiming the good news. When someone complained, he cited a Biblical passage that enjoined him to proclaim his faith in a loud voice so that others might follow in his footsteps.

That's a problem with the Bible: So many passages, so many messages, so many interpretations.



W.J. Astore

On September 17th, a [new TV documentary series](#) on the Vietnam War by Ken Burns (famous for past series on the U.S. Civil War, Baseball, and Jazz, among others) and Lynn Novick begins its run on PBS. Airing in ten parts over 18 hours, the series promises a comprehensive look at the war from all sides, with the catchphrase “There is no single truth in war” serving as a guiding light. Initial excerpts suggest the series isn’t looking to provide definitive answers, perhaps as a way of avoiding political controversy in the Age of Trump.

I’ll be watching the series, but I have ten points of my own to make about America’s war in Vietnam. As a preamble, the [Vietnam War](#) (American version) was both [mistake](#) and [crime](#). What’s disconcerting in the U.S. media is the emphasis on the war as an American tragedy, when it was truly a horrific tragedy inflicted upon the peoples of Southeast Asia (Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians). Yes, American troops suffered and died in large numbers, yet Southeast Asian casualties were [perhaps 50 times](#) as great. Along with [wanton killing](#) came the poisoning of the environment with defoliants like Agent Orange; meanwhile, mines and unexploded ordnance from the war continue to kill people today in Southeast Asia. In a sense, the killing from that war still isn’t over.

With the caveat that we should reserve judgment until we’ve seen the series, let’s keep these ten points in mind as we watch:

1. To most Americans, [Vietnam is a war](#). And war is a distorting and limiting lens through which to view cultures and peoples. Will Burns recognize this distortion?
2. The series talks about hearing voices from all sides of the conflict. But will the Vietnamese people, together with Laotians and Cambodians, really have as much say as Americans?
3. The U.S. suffered nearly 60,000 troops killed. But Vietnamese killed numbered in the millions. And the destruction to SE Asia — the spread of the war to Laos and Cambodia — was on a scale that rivaled or surpassed the destruction to the American South during the U.S. Civil War. Will that destruction be thoroughly documented and explained?
4. Whose point of view will prevail in the documentary? What will be the main thread of the narrative? Will the war be presented as a tragedy? A misunderstanding? A mistake? A crime? Will the “noble cause” and “stabbed in the back” myths (the ideas that the U.S. fought for freedom and democracy and against communism, and that the U.S. military could have won but was prevented from doing so by unpatriotic forces at home) be given equal time in the interests of a “fair and balanced” presentation? Will these myths be presented as alternative truths of the war?
5. Which American war in Vietnam will be presented? Even when we talk of the American part of the Vietnam War, there were at least four wars. The U.S. Army under General William Westmoreland fought a conventional, search and destroy, war. The Air Force wanted to prove that airpower alone, specifically bombing, could win the war. The

Marines were more interested in counterinsurgency and pacification. The CIA and special ops types were engaged in psychological warfare, assassinations, torture, and god-knows-what-else.

6. The American presence in Vietnam became so overwhelming that by 1967-68 the Vietnamese economy was completely distorted. We brought American materialism and profligacy to a nation that was, by comparison, impoverished and “backwards” (from our perspective, of course). Material superiority bred and fed cockiness.

Consider Meredith Lair’s book, “Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War” (2011). It details the non-combat experiences of U.S. troops in Vietnam. Here’s a telling book blurb written by historian [Christian Appy](#): “Meredith Lair’s fascinating analysis of rear-echelon life among American G.I.s dramatically challenges our most common conceptions of U.S. military experiences in Vietnam. From steaks to steam-baths, swimming pools to giant PXs, the amenities provided on large bases not only belie conventional images of that war, but also stand as dramatic testimony to the desperate and unsuccessful effort of American officials to bolster flagging troop morale as the war lurched toward its final failure.”

Will this orgy of American-driven materialism be documented?

7. Anti-war protests and serious unrest within the U.S. military led to the end of the draft and the creation of an “all-volunteer” military. Has this decision contributed to a more imperial U.S. foreign policy facilitated by a much more tractable military of “volunteers”?

8. Short of nuclear weapons, the U.S. military used virtually every weapon in its arsenal in SE Asia. The region became a test/proving ground for all sorts of weapons and concepts, from “smart” weapons and electronic fences and sensors to horrendous pounding by conventional bombs to war on the environment using defoliants and massive bulldozers to ... well ... everything. All sorts of pacification theories were tested as well, along with COIN and “small wars” and unconventional tactics to search and destroy to Vietnamization to ... well ... again, everything. SE Asia became a laboratory and its peoples became lab rats. Will this reality be fully documented?

9. It’s essential that people realize President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, knew the war was a lost cause no later than 1969. ([Their conversations](#) on tape prove this.) All they were looking for was a “decent interval” between a peace treaty (“peace with honor”) and what they saw as the inevitable collapse. They got that (in)decent interval of roughly 2.5 years. The Congressional decision to cut off funding to South Vietnam was convenient for the Nixon/Kissinger acolytes, since it allowed them to shift the blame for South Vietnam’s collapse in 1975 to Congress as well as to the usual “suspect” elements in American society, i.e. the peace movement.

Will the duplicity and hypocrisy of Nixon/Kissinger be adequately documented?

10. Finally, an important aspect of the Vietnam War was the breakdown in discipline within the U.S. military, which helped to drive the eventual elimination of the draft. Part of this breakdown was driven by drugs, a trade in which the CIA was implicated. At *The Intercept*, Jeremy Scahill interviewed Alfred McCoy, who wrote the book on this drug trade. Here’s an excerpt from [their recent interview](#):

Alfred McCoy: *And in 1970 and '71, there were rumors that started coming back from Vietnam, particularly 1971, that heroin was spreading rapidly in the ranks of the U.S. forces fighting in South Vietnam. And in later research, done by the White House, [it was] determined that in 1971, 34 percent, one-third of all the American combat troops fighting in South Vietnam were heavy heroin users. There were, if that statistic is accurate, more addicts in the ranks of the U.S. Army in South Vietnam than there were in the United States.*

And so what I did was I set out to investigate: Where was the opium coming from? Where was the heroin coming from? Who was trafficking it? How is it getting to the troops in their barracks and bunkers across the length and breadth of South Vietnam? Nobody was asking this question. Everyone was reporting on the high level of abuse, but nobody was figuring out where and who.

So I started interviewing. I went to Paris. I interviewed the head of the French equivalent of the CIA in Indochina, who was then head of a major French helicopter manufacturing company, and he explained to me how during the French Indochina war from 1946 to 1954, they were short of money for covert operations, so the hill tribes in Laos produced the opium, the aircraft picked it up, they turned it over to the netherworld, the gangsters that controlled Saigon and secured it for the French and that paid for their covert operations. And I said, "What about now?" And he said, "Well I don't think the pattern's changed. I think it's still there. You should go and look."

So I did. I went to Saigon. I got some top sources in the Vietnamese military. I went to Laos. I hiked into the mountains. I was ambushed by CIA mercenaries and what I discovered was that the CIA's contract airline, Air America, was flying into the villages of the Hmong people in Northern Laos, whose main cash crop was opium and they were picking up the opium and flying it out of the hills and there were heroin labs — one of the heroin labs, the biggest heroin lab in the world, was run by the commander-in-chief of the Royal Laotian Army, a man whose military budget came entirely from the United States. And they were transforming, in those labs, the opium into heroin. It was being smuggled into South Vietnam by three cliques controlled by the president, the vice president, and the premier of South Vietnam, and their military allies and distributed to U.S. forces in South Vietnam.

And the CIA wasn't directly involved, but they turned a blind eye to the role of their allies' involvement in the traffic. And so this heroin epidemic swept the U.S. Army in Vietnam. The Defense Department invented mass urine analysis testing, so when those troops left they were tested and given treatment. And what I discovered was the complexities, the complicity, of the CIA in this traffic and that was a pattern that was repeated in Central America when the Contras became involved in the traffic.

These ten items highlight just some of the complexities of the Vietnam War and its effects throughout Southeast Asia. How many of these will be tackled honestly in Ken Burns's new series? We shall see, beginning in two weeks.

With the Pentagon, Trump Has Morphed Into Hillary Clinton

W.J.



Candidate Trump occasionally said unconventional things about the Pentagon and America's wars. He attacked the Pentagon for wasteful spending; cost overruns on the [F-35 jet fighter](#) were a favorite target. He attacked the Iraq and Afghan wars as wasteful, asserting they'd cost trillions of dollars without aiding the U.S. in any measurable way. He argued for friendlier relations with Russia, a détente of sort compared to the policies followed by the Obama administration. Naturally, even as he declaimed against America's wasteful wars and costly weaponry, he promised to fund the military generously. Finally, he wasn't afraid to take America's generals to task, asserting he knew more than they did about war and foreign policy.

President Trump is a different man. "His" generals have brought him under control. Criticism of the F-35 has gone away. Trump, even if reluctantly, has [embraced](#) the Afghan war and the Pentagon's open-ended commitment to it. Russian détente has taken a back seat to tough talk and sanctions (not that Trump had much of a choice, considering his campaign is under investigation for possible collusion with Russia). More than anything, Trump has tacitly admitted "his" generals know far more than he does. Mattis controls the Pentagon and the National Security State. Kelly, as White House Chief of Staff, does his best to control Trump. McMaster, as National Security Adviser, increasingly controls what Trump knows and when he knows it with respect to security policy.

In short, the generals have won. Consider the fates of [Steve Bannon](#), [Sebastian Gorka](#), and John Bolton. Bannon was eased out; Gorka was fired; and Bolton, according to today's *FP: Foreign Policy* report, "has been shut out of the White House under the new leadership of chief of staff John Kelly. FP's Dan De Luce writes that several sources confirm Bolton's regular meetings with Trump are a thing of the past, and he has been unable to deliver a plan he devised to get Washington out of the deal it signed with Tehran to halt that country's nuclear program."

I'm no fan of Bannon-Gorka-Bolton, but they did represent a challenge to the U.S. military and the neo-con orthodoxy that rules Washington.

Trump is now firmly under the U.S. military's control, even as he continues to feed the beast with more money and influence. His only way out is to starve the beast — to cut its funding by cutting its mission. Fat chance of that happening anytime soon, with generals like Mattis, Kelly, and McMaster in charge.

Most in the mainstream media see this in a positive light. We read about how Trump's generals are the adults in the room, a moderating influence on Trump's ill-informed impetuosity. There may even be some truth to this. But here's the rub: President Trump, at least on national security policy, has ironically morphed into Hillary Clinton. He's become a conventional hawk with no new ideas, when as a candidate he had the temerity to criticize America's wasteful weaponry and disastrous imperial policies.

As Trump himself might tweet, "Sad."

Trump's Afghan War Speech: More of the Same, With More Killing

W.J. Astore

As a private citizen and presidential candidate, Donald Trump railed against the Afghan war. A waste, he said. Americans [should withdraw](#), he said. But in last night's [speech](#), Trump went against his own instincts (so he said) and went with the failed policies of his predecessors. The war will continue, no timetable set, no troop levels determined, with conditions on the ground dictating America's actions, according to the president.

What caught my attention, beyond the usual paeans of praise to America's "warriors" and "warfighters," was the specious reasoning to justify the continuation of the war. Trump gave three reasons, so let's take them one at a time:

1. "First, our nation must seek an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives ..."

It's piss-poor reasoning to argue that, because a lot of people have sacrificed and died in a war, the war should continue (with more people dying) to justify those previous sacrifices. By this logic, the more who die, the more we should keep fighting, meaning more dead, meaning more fighting, and so on. Where is the honor and "worthy" outcome here?

2. "Second, the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable. 9/11, the worst terrorist attack in our history, was planned and directed from Afghanistan because that country was ruled by a government that gave comfort and shelter to terrorists. A hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly fill, just as happened before September 11th."

Actually, the consequences of an American withdrawal are both unpredictable and (most probably) acceptable. Sure, terrorist organizations may gain impetus from an American withdrawal. It's also possible that a notoriously corrupt Afghan government might finally negotiate with the Taliban and other organizations, and that regional power brokers like Pakistan and Iran, who have their own interests in regional stability, might broker a settlement that



Trump, surrounded by troops and patriotic bunting, defines his "new" Afghan strategy (Carolyn Kaster/AP)

Americans could live with.

Trump further argued that a rapid U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 led to "hard-won gains slip[ping] back into the hands of terrorist enemies. Our soldiers watched as cities they had fought for, and bled to liberate, and won, were occupied by a terrorist group called ISIS." The truth is far more complex. The prolonged U.S. occupation of Iraq helped to create ISIS in the first place, and [failed American efforts](#) to create and train reliable Iraqi security forces contributed to easy ISIS victories after U.S. forces left in 2011.

3. "Third and finally, I concluded that the security threats we face in Afghanistan and the broader region are immense. Today, 20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan — the highest concentration in any region anywhere in the world."

Isn't it remarkable that, after sixteen years of sustained effort by the U.S. military, the Af-Pak region is now home to 20+ terrorist organizations? The "highest concentration" in the world? Is this not an admission of the [utter failure](#) of U.S. policy and actions since 2001? How is this failure to be rectified by yet more U.S. attacks?

Trump said the new American goal is to kill terrorists. This is not a strategy. It's a perpetual and deadly game of Whac-A-Mole. That's what Trump's vaunted new strategy boils down to, despite the talk of economic pressure and working with Pakistan and India and other regional powers.

On Afghanistan, Trump should have listened to [his instincts](#) and withdrawn. Instead, he listened to "his" [generals](#). With Trump, the generals won this round. What they can't win, however, is the war.

Of Historical Statues and Monuments



To counterbalance the perceived grimness of Maya Lin's Vietnam wall memorial, more traditional statues depicting soldiers were added near it.

W.J. Astore

Historical statues and monuments are in the news, but sadly not because Americans have taken a new interest in understanding their history. Statues of men who supported the Confederacy, prominent generals like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, for example, have been appropriated by White supremacists (this is [nothing new](#), actually). Such statues have been defended as "[beautiful](#)" by a man, Donald Trump, with little sense of history, even as other Americans have called for these and similar statues to be removed.

Statues, of course, are just that. Inanimate objects. Places for pigeons to poop. It's we who invest them with meaning. Most people, I think, take little notice of statues and monuments until they become controversial, after which everyone has an opinion.

For me, statues and monuments are a stimulus for reflection as well as education. Who was that guy on a horse? Why is he being honored? And what does that decision tell us about who we were and are as a people?

As a people, we choose certain historical figures as worthy of being sculpted in stone or cast in bronze. We choose

our heroes, so to speak, our paragons, our worthies. And our choices are just that — choices. They reflect certain values, priorities, motives, feelings. And since our values, our motives, our sense of what is good and bad, right and wrong, change over time, so too can our statues and memorials change, if that is the will of the people in a democracy that enshrines freedom of choice.

If the peoples of various states choose to remove certain statues, so be it. Other statues might take their place; other worthies might be selected as more in keeping with the times and our values as we conceive them today as a people.

What we choose to memorialize as a people says much about ourselves. Many statues and memorials fall under the category of “man on horseback.” Certainly, military figures like Lee and Jackson were considered great men of their times, at least in a Confederate context. They also, sadly, became potent symbols of racism in the Jim Crow South, physical symbols of the myth of the Lost Cause, intimidating and demoralizing figures to Black communities struggling against violence and prejudice.

Americans are an intemperate lot, driven by extremes, constantly fighting to reconfigure ourselves through our interpretation and re-interpretation of history. All this is proof to William Faulkner’s famous saying that, “The past is not dead. It’s not even past.”

As a historian, I find it deeply sad as well as ironic that, at a time when education in history is withering in the United States, the importance of history has arguably never been greater. We should use statues as a stimulus for learning, but instead they’re more often appropriated as a driver for divisiveness.

If nothing else, today’s debates about statues should remind us yet again of the importance of history and a proper understanding of it. History is inherently disputatious. Controversial. Challenging. Exciting. If we can tap the heat generated by the latest controversies and warm students to a study of history in all its richness, perhaps some good can come from the ongoing controversy.

What kind of statues and memorials are the “right” ones for America? It’s a vexing question, is it not? It’s also a question with powerful implications. I come back to George Orwell’s comment (slightly paraphrased): *He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.*

Our understanding of the past — our selective celebration of it — helps to define what is possible in the future. If you celebrate generals on horseback — military men of the Confederacy — you make a choice that helps to shape what is seen as right and proper in the present moment, and what will be right and proper in the future.

For a better future, I’d like to see fewer statues to military men and sports heroes and the like, and more to visionaries who sought a better way for us as a people. I recall a small monument I saw to [Elihu Burritt](#) in Massachusetts. No one is talking about him or his legacy today. He’s an obscure figure compared to his contemporaries, Lee and Jackson. Known as the “Learned Blacksmith,” he was a committed pacifist and abolitionist who worked to educate the less fortunate in society.

If we are to build prominent statues and monuments, would it not be better to build them to people like Elihu Burritt, people who worked for justice and equality, people who fought against war and slavery and for peace and freedom?



That Google Diversity Memo



W.J. Astore

What does “diversity” mean in the workplace as well as American society? Are women at a disadvantage in technical fields and, if so, is this due primarily to biology or gender or sociological/cultural factors? These questions have grabbed headlines lately due to a memo written by [James Damore](#), a young software specialist at Google. Damore’s memo, which you can [read here](#), accused Google of creating and sustaining an ideological echo chamber that favored liberal/left-leaning ideas to the detriment of conservative viewpoints. He further suggested that biological differences are a key reason for the under-representation of women in technical career fields, and that diversity efforts are too focused on surface differences like sex and skin color. The memo led to his firing, after which Damore became a martyr of sorts within conservative circles.

In his memo, Damore is careful to say he respects diversity, that he recognizes gender and racial discrimination, and that he’s committed to fostering discussion. Rather than summarize his memo, I’d like to make a few comments on it and the general subject, drawn from my experience as an engineer in the U.S. Air Force and my time as a professor teaching lessons on gender and technology.

But first I’d like to recall my time in engineering school in the early 1980s. It was a mostly male environment. “Woman” was a term thrown about as a tepid form of insult. (I recall one male student telling another who lagged, “Hurry up, woman.”) Female students, I sensed, had to “prove” themselves more, or at least to explain why they wanted to be engineers (male students had nothing to explain, since engineering was supposedly “natural” to them). To be a female engineering student was to be in the minority, and since almost all of the professors were male, role models for younger women were scarce.

In my experience in the military, I worked with female coders, engineers, and managers. All were well qualified, and indeed as an officer managing a project, I couldn’t have cared less about gender. I recall an effort at the MITRE

Corporation to recruit and mentor female engineers by female managers, which made perfect sense to me.

Based on my experience, it was easier for men to be promoted in technical jobs simply because there were more male mentors around. I also think women in tech had and have it tougher (in part) because their roles were and are more constrained/restricted by society's expectations. Put simply, in American society it's easier for a man to be almost anything than for a woman to be almost anything. Society "tells" women what is appropriate for their gender far more than it dictates to men.

That said, let's tackle "diversity," a term that in American discourse is overloaded with baggage. For some on the right, it's equated with "reverse discrimination" against (mainly White) men. For some on the left, it's equated with gender, skin color, and similar biological as well as ethnic/physical differences. For me, diversity ideally should focus on abilities, points of view, talent, creativity, and the like. As an engineer or manager, I'd like a diverse team, with a range of talents and skills and viewpoints, able to work creatively to solve problems. That should be the goal.

James Damore, in writing his memo, didn't help himself by suggesting women are more neurotic and anxious than men (which echoes the old "hysteria" argument that women are biologically less stable and flightier than men). If you start citing studies on neuroses and anxiety that are allegedly prevalent more in women than men, you must be aware of prior uses of hysteria and similar ideas to mark women as unstable and unreliable when compared to allegedly unhysterical men.

(An aside: I suppose I could construct an argument suggesting that men are too violent to be hired because statistics show they're much more likely than women to commit a mass shooting in the workplace. Sorry, guys. It's not discrimination — it's "biology." You have too much testosterone-driven anger to be reliable.)

Damore's memo, I think, suffers from his own sense of outrage: the writer is fed up with Google diversity policies, which perhaps make him (and many others) feel like he needs to apologize for being male. This has led him to focus on alleged biological differences as the driver for his memo.

I do agree, however, with his point that too often diversity efforts are simplistic. So many differences interact and combine to make us who we are as humans. What about class differences, for example? If a tech team consists entirely of college-educated members of the upper-middle class, and all American, and all in their twenties and thirties, is it diverse even if it's 50-50 male/female? Which qualities do we privilege in a push for diversity? Gender? Race? Class? Nationality? Age? (As an aside, it's not easy for older engineers to get jobs; they're often assumed to be both overqualified and out-of-touch.)

Damore could also pay more attention to history. He suggests, for example, that women as women seek promotions and higher pay less often than men. They don't "lean in" as much as they should. But it's hardly that simple. It used to be (and still is?) that men were promoted and paid more not necessarily because they "leaned in," i.e. were more macho and demanding, but because it was assumed a man was the breadwinner for a family. Whereas if a woman worked at the same job, it was often assumed she wasn't the primary breadwinner.

That is, it wasn't that women were simply too "weak" (biology/psychology) to demand a raise; they didn't ask because they knew they wouldn't get it. Or, if they did ask, they weren't too surprised when a man got it instead. It wasn't always due to a conspiratorial old boys' club (though those existed), but rather the societal/cultural bias that a man, as head of a family, needed the extra money more. Also, bosses tend to promote underlings like themselves. Men in charge tend to promote younger men who are mirror images, especially if the latter play their cards right (are properly deferential, let their boss win at golf, and so on).

When we look at why women are under-represented in technical fields, biology is arguably the least important factor to consider. Historical, cultural, sociological, and gender factors all weigh heavily on efforts to increase women's participation. In short, Damore's memo is perhaps most valuable not at pointing a way forward, but in revealing the persistence of certain attitudes and biases that still need to be addressed in the drive for a fair and equitable society.