

Tomgram: William Astore, The Superpower That Fought Itself -- And Lost

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[Note for TomDispatch Readers: Don't forget our [special offers](#) on historian Alfred McCoy's just-published *Dispatch Book* (already in its second printing!): [In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power](#). Of it, Andrew Bacevich said, "This is history with profound relevance to events that are unfolding before our eyes." For a donation of \$100 or more (\$125 if you live outside the U.S.A.), you can get a signed, personalized copy of the book. For further details, go to [our donation page](#). (Many, many thanks to those of you who have already done this and so lent us a hand in tough times.) In addition, Haymarket Books, which produces and distributes our expanding line of volumes, will give any TD reader an exclusive 40% discount on the purchase of McCoy's book. Simply click [here](#) to take advantage of this special offer. It's a great way to support our efforts. Tom]

After 19 al-Qaeda militants armed only with box-cutters and knives hijacked four American commercial airliners, the U.S. military moved with remarkable efficiency to rectify the problem. In the years since, in its global war on terror, the Pentagon has ensured that America's enemies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere have regularly been able to arm themselves with... well, not to beat around the bush, a [remarkable range](#) of U.S. weaponry. The [latest such story](#): a report that in recent fighting around the city of Tal Afar, the Iraqi military recovered a U.S.-produced FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank missile and launcher from an Islamic State weapons cache. That's a weapon capable of taking out an M1 Abrams tank. And this is hardly the first time U.S. anti-tank missiles meant either for the Iraqi military or Syrian rebels backed by the CIA have turned up in the hands of ISIS militants. In 2015, that group [released photos](#) of its fighters using U.S.-made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles.

Of course, when the American-trained, funded, and armed Iraqi army [collapsed](#) in the summer of 2014 in the face of relatively small numbers of ISIS fighters, that group took [vast stores](#) of U.S. weaponry and vehicles that they've used ever since. But that was hardly the end of it. The U.S. soon began retraining and rearming its Iraqi allies to the tune of \$1.6 billion for "tens of thousands of assault rifles, hundreds of armored vehicles, hundreds of mortar rounds, nearly 200 sniper rifles, and other gear," much of which, a government audit [found](#), the Pentagon simply lost track of. The weaponry, you might say, went missing in action. No one knew whose hands much of it ended up in and this wasn't a new story, either. For example, in 2007 the Government Accountability Office found that "the United States could not account for nearly 30% of the weapons it had distributed in Iraq since 2004 -- about 200,000 guns."

Similar stories could be told about Afghanistan, another country where U.S. weaponry has [disappeared](#) in remarkable quantities. (The Taliban, for instance, recently [released a video](#) of their fighters sporting weaponry normally used only by U.S. Special Operations personnel.) In short, the Pentagon has been arming itself, its allies, and its [enemies](#) in a profligate fashion for years now in its never-ending conflicts across the Greater Middle East and Africa. As [TomDispatch regular](#) and retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel William Astore suggests today, since 9/11 the U.S. military has in some sense been fighting itself -- and losing. Someday, when historians look back on this bizarre tale, they will have to explain one thing above all: Why, year after year, in the face of obvious and repetitive failure in such conflicts, was no one in Washington capable of imagining another course of action? Tom

The American Military Uncontained Out Everywhere and Winning Nowhere

By [William J. Astore](#)

When it comes to the "world's greatest military," the news has been shocking. Two fast U.S. 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 U.S. Special Operations forces deployed everywhere and winning nowhere? Why, in short, is the U.S. 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. Meanwhile, insiders like retired General 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 U.S. 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 U.S. military interventions.

Once upon a time, when there were still two superpowers on Planet Earth, Washington's worldwide military posture had a clear rationale: the containment of communism. Soon after the Soviet Union imploded in 1991 to much triumphalist self-congratulation in Washington, the scholar and former CIA consultant Chalmers Johnson had an epiphany. What he would come to call "the American Raj," a global imperial structure ostensibly built to corral the menace of communism, wasn't going away just because that menace had evaporated, leaving not a superpower nor even a major power as an opponent anywhere on the horizon. Quite the opposite, Washington -- and its globe-spanning "empire" of military bases -- was only digging in deeper and for the long haul. At that moment, with a certain shock, Johnson realized that the U.S. was itself an empire and, with its mirror-image-enemy gone, risked

turning on itself and becoming its own [nemesis](#).

The U.S., it turned out, hadn't just contained the Soviets; they had contained us, too. Once their empire collapsed, our leaders imbibed the old dream of Woodrow Wilson, even if in a newly militarized fashion: to remake the world in one's own image (if need be at the point of a sword).

Since the early 1990s, largely unconstrained by peer rivals, America's leaders have acted as if there were nothing to stop them from doing as they pleased on the planet, which, as it turned out, meant there was nothing to stop them from their own folly. We witness the results today. Prolonged and disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Interventions throughout the [Greater Middle East](#) (Libya, Syria, [Yemen](#), and beyond) that spread chaos and destruction. Attacks against terrorism that have given new impetus to jihadists everywhere. And recently calls to [arm Ukraine](#) against Russia. All of this is consistent with a hubristic strategic vision that, in these years, has spoken in an all-encompassing fashion and without irony of [global reach](#), [global power](#), and full-spectrum dominance.

In this context, it's worth reminding ourselves of the full scope of America's military power. All the world is a stage -- or a staging area -- for U.S. troops. There are still approximately [800](#) U.S. military bases in foreign lands. America's commandos deploy to more than [130 countries](#) yearly. And even the world is not enough for the Pentagon as it seeks to dominate not just land, sea, and air but outer space, cyberspace, and even inner space, if you count efforts to achieve "total information awareness" through [17 intelligence agencies](#) dedicated -- at a cost of [\\$80 billion a year](#) -- to sweeping up all data on Planet Earth.

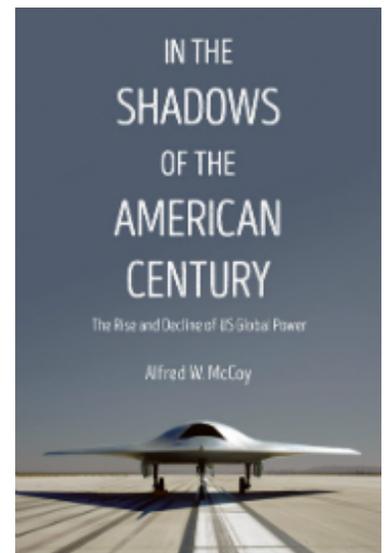
In short, America's troops are out everywhere and winning nowhere, a problem America's "winningest" president, Donald Trump, is only exacerbating. Surrounded by "his" [generals](#), Trump has -- against his own instincts, he claimed recently -- [recommitted](#) American troops and prestige to the Afghan War. He's also significantly expanded U.S. drone strikes and [bombing](#) throughout the Greater Middle East, and threatened to bring [fire and fury](#) to North Korea, while pushing a program to boost military spending.

At a Pentagon awash in money, with promises of more to come, missions are rarely downsized. Meanwhile, what passes for original thinking in the Trump White House is the suggestion of Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater, [to privatize](#) America's war in Afghanistan (and possibly elsewhere). Mercenaries are the answer to Washington's military problems, suggests Prince. And mercs, of course, have the added benefit of not being constrained by the rules of engagement that apply to America's uniformed service members.

Indeed, Prince's idea, though [opposed](#) by Trump's generals, is compelling in one sense: If you accept the notion that America's wars in these years have been fought largely for the corporate agendas of the military-industrial complex, why not turn warfighting itself over to the [warrior corporations](#) that now regularly accompany the military into battle, cutting out the middleman, that very military?

Hammering a Cloud of Gnats

Erik Prince's mercenaries will, however, have to bide their time as the military high command continues to launch kinetic strikes against elusive foes around the globe. By its own admission, the force recent U.S. presidents have [touted](#) as the "finest" in history faces remarkably "asymmetrical" and protean enemies, including the roughly [20 terrorist organizations](#) in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater of operations. In striking at such relatively puny foes, the U.S. reminds me of the mighty Thor of superhero fame swinging his hammer violently against a cloud of gnats. In the process, some of those gnats will naturally die, but the result will still be an exhausted superhero and ever more gnats attracted by the heat and commotion of battle.



[Buy the book](#)

I first came across [the phrase](#) “using a sledgehammer to kill gnats” while looking at the history of U.S. [airpower](#) during the Vietnam War. B-52 “Arc Light” raids dropped record tons of bombs on parts of South Vietnam and Laos in largely failed efforts to kill dispersed guerrillas and interdict supply routes from North Vietnam. Half a century later, with its laser- and GPS-guided bombs, the Air Force regularly touts the far greater precision of American airpower. Yet in one country after another, using just that weaponry, the U.S. has engaged in serial acts of overkill. In Afghanistan, it was the recent use of [MOAB](#), the “mother of all bombs,” the largest non-nuclear weapon the U.S. has ever used [in combat](#), against a small concentration of ISIS fighters. In similar fashion, the U.S. air war in Syria has outpaced the [Russians](#) and even the Assad regime in its murderous effects on civilians, [especially around](#) Raqqa, the “capital” of the Islamic State. Such overkill is evident on the ground as well where special ops raids have, this year, left civilians dead from [Yemen](#) to [Somalia](#). In other words, across the Greater Middle East, Washington’s profligate killing machine is also creating a desire for vengeance among civilian populations, staggering numbers of whom, when not killed, have been displaced or sent fleeing across borders as [refugees](#) in these wars. It has played a significant role in unsettling whole regions, creating [failed states](#), and providing yet more recruits for terror groups.

Leaving aside technological advances, little has changed since Vietnam. The U.S. military is still relying on enormous firepower to kill elusive enemies as a way of limiting (American) casualties. As an instrument of victory, it didn’t work in Vietnam, nor has it worked in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But never mind the history lessons. President Trump asserts that his “new” Afghan strategy -- the details of which, according to a military spokesman, are [“not there yet”](#) -- will lead to more terrorists (that is, gnats) being killed.

Since 9/11, America’s leaders, Trump included, have rarely sought ways to avoid those gnats, while efforts to [“drain the swamp”](#) in which the gnats thrive have served mainly to enlarge their breeding grounds. At the same time, efforts to enlist indigenous “gnats” -- local proxy armies -- to take over the fight have gone poorly indeed. As in Vietnam, the main U.S. focus has invariably been on developing better, more technologically advanced (which means more expensive) sledgehammers, while continuing to whale away at that cloud of gnats -- a process as hopeless as it is counterproductive.

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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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.

A [TomDispatch regular](#), William Astore is a retired lieutenant colonel (USAF) and history professor. His personal blog is [Bracing Views](#).

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