AMERICAN RECKONING

The Vietnam War and Our National Identity

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VIKING

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Who We Are

Our nation is the greatest force for good in history.

—President George W. Bush, August 31, 2002

If you want to know who we are, what America is, how we respond to evil—that's it. Selflessly. Compassionately. Unafraid.

—President Barack Obama, April 16, 2013

WHEN THE LAST U.S. combat troops finally pulled out of Iraq in December 2011, most Americans felt little relief. More than 60 percent of the public had opposed the war since 2006, yet their opinion seemed to count for nothing. Even when they elected a new president in 2008 who had been among the war's first critics, it took Barack Obama another three years to find an exit. And so the war that began in March 2003 with "shock and awe" ended almost nine years later in head-shaking silence. No one could be confident that the United States had left behind anything but a wrecked and divided country.

As President Obama slowly withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq, he added 35,000 more to Afghanistan, the war he always said was necessary and just, the land where Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda had once had their most important bases. But by the time Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan, bin Laden and most al-Qaeda members had long since departed and others were vying to divide and control the country. The United States remained,

struggling to defend an unpopular government against a seemingly endless insurgency.

Then on May 2, 2011, the White House announced that a team of navy SEALs had killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. To some, it felt like the first moment of closure in the long, disastrous decade since the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001. But the killing of bin Laden changed little. The United States had been attacked by stateless enemies with the ability to organize and recruit anywhere in the world. In response to that threat, President George W. Bush declared global war, the bluntest possible instrument to use against borderless criminals who lacked a standing army. President Obama believed he found in drone warfare and special operations a more surgical approach, but it only succeeded at extending the global war to more countries with no evidence that the United States or the world was safer because of it.

Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan continued, and the news got no better. In early 2012, just after the United States had finally withdrawn from Iraq, a series of stories once again raised troubling questions about the morality and justice of America's use of military force. First, in January 2012, a video surfaced showing four U.S. Marines in combat gear laughing as they urinated on Afghan corpses. In February 2012, six American soldiers burned at least a hundred copies of the Koran as part of an effort to destroy some two thousand books the military deemed "suspicious." The book burning sparked a week of deadly riots. In March 2012, a U.S. soldier went into two Kandahar villages in the early morning and murdered sixteen civilians, most of them women and children. And then, in April 2012, soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division posed for photos as they held up the severed legs of a suicide bomber.

So many similar stories had piled up over the previous decade, it was hard to believe that anyone would claim that they were only the misdeeds of a "few bad apples" that said nothing of significance about the nation as a whole or its foreign policy. Yet that is precisely what the Obama administration claimed. In response to the Kandahar massacre the president said: "We are heartbroken over the loss of innocent life.... It's not who we are as a country and it does not represent our military." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton read from the same script: "Like many Americans I was shocked and saddened by the killings of innocent Afghan villagers this weekend.... This is not who we are."

As for the Koran burnings? "This is not who we are," commented General John Allen. And when American troops smiled for photographs while holding enemy body parts, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said: "This is not who we are, and what we represent." Whatever the revelation—atrocities in the field, torture in secret prisons, government sanction for abuses of rights at home and abroad—the mantra is always the same: evildoing is the work of our enemies alone.

Things looked like they might take a new turn in May 2012, when Defense Secretary Panetta went to Fort Benning to give a major speech. A military spokesman said he wanted to respond to "recent isolated incidents of misconduct and ethical lapses in judgment." In fact, however, Panetta made no specific reference to the pissed-upon corpses or murdered civilians. Nor did he take command responsibility for any crimes or abuses, or express remorse for the harm done to Afghanistan. In front of thirteen thousand soldiers of the Third Infantry Division's Heavy Brigade Combat Team (the Hammer Brigade), Panetta devoted almost all of his speech to praising the troops—their "vigilance and honor" and their "very courageous" willingness to put their "lives on the line." These blandishments were met with many cheers and "Hoo-ahs!"

Near the end Panetta pointed to the "challenges ahead." Although "our enemies are losing on the battlefield," they "will seek any opportunity to damage us. In particular, they have sought to take advantage of a series of troubling incidents that have involved misconduct on the part of a few."

> That brings me to the last point I want to make. I need every one of you... to always display the strongest character, the greatest discipline and the utmost integrity.... I know that you are proud, proud to wear the uniform of your country and that you strive to live up to the highest standards that we expect of you. But the reality is that we are fighting a different kind of war and living in a different kind of world than when I was a lieutenant here at Fort Benning. These days it takes only seconds—seconds for a picture, a photo, to suddenly become an international headline. And those headlines can impact the mission that we're engaged in. They can put your fellow service members at risk.

> They can hurt morale. They can damage our standing in the world, and they can cost lives. I know that none of you—none of you deliberately acts to hurt your mission or to put your fellow soldiers at risk. You are the best.

Panetta's main point is that "misconduct" by U.S. troops hurts *America.* When U.S. troops defile the foreign dead, or commit atrocities, those acts damage *our* morale, *our* mission, *our* reputation, and further endanger *our* troops. We are the primary victims. Panetta does not tell the troops that war crimes are morally wrong. Indeed, the crimes themselves were not even his focus. His concern is the photographic evidence of them that appears in the media. The enemy will "take advantage" of those stories to "damage" the United States. Panetta's implicit message boils down to this: Don't commit war crimes, because you never know when someone might take a picture of it to make us look bad.

For a quarter century after the Vietnam War, the military's media management and censorship effectively screened out the most troubling images of American warfare from mainstream coverage. During the Persian Gulf War, for example, the most commonly viewed images featured American high-tech weapons, not their victims—smart bombs rocketing down chimneys, but no pictures of the wreckage when they landed. Photographers like Peter Turnley (*The Unseen Gulf War*) and Kenneth Jarecke (*Just Another War*) show unsanitized scenes of slaughter, but very few Americans saw them. Had some of those images been on the front pages of American newspapers, they might have become as iconic as the best-known photographs of the Vietnam War era—the self-immolating monk in Saigon (1963), the pistol-to-the-temple street-corner execution (1968), the trench of murdered civilians in My Lai (1968), the student shot dead at Kent State University (1970), the naked girl burned by napalm, running down a highway (1972).

It was only after 9/11 that the public began again to see a new round of horrifying photographs from American war zones. As Leon Panetta well understood, cell phones and the Internet now made it virtually impossible to block the distribution of damning information and images. In 2004, for example, Americans saw pictures taken by U.S. soldiers serving as guards in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. Many of the photos show the guards smiling and hamming it up as they abuse and degrade prisoners. One photo shows a young American woman, Private Lynndie England, standing next to a line of naked male prisoners with bags over their heads. The men have been ordered to masturbate. England looks directly at the camera with a half smile and a cigarette jutting out the side of her mouth. She is using one hand to point at a prisoner's genitals and the other to give a thumbs-up.

Investigations revealed that U.S. guards beat and sodomized prisoners with broomsticks and phosphoric lights, forced them to eat out of toilets, slammed them against the wall, urinated and spat upon them, made them wear female underwear, led them around on leashes, made them sleep on wet floors, attacked them with dogs, poured chemicals on them, stripped them naked and rode them like animals.

In response to the Abu Ghraib photographs, President George W. Bush said, "What took place in that prison does not represent the America that I know. The America I know is a compassionate country." But, in fact, Bush opened the door to just such behavior when he signed a memorandum on February 7, 2002, waiving U.S. adherence to the Third Geneva Convention, which guarantees humane treatment to prisoners of war. The memo asserted that al-Qaeda or Taliban detainees were exempt from such protections. In practice, the military and CIA used that authorization to justify the use of torture on any of its captives, even those who had nothing to do with the attacks of 9/11. An additional series of memos produced by the Bush administration explicitly sanctioned torture. Just prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, John Yoo, a Justice Department lawyer, wrote a memo concluding that federal laws against torture, assault, and maiming would not apply to the overseas interrogation of terror suspects.

Top officials like Vice President Dick Cheney and CIA director George Tenet may have shielded President Bush from detailed information about the worst U.S. practices, but the president clearly gave general sanction to torture (including the forced near-drowning called waterboarding) and "extraordinary rendition" (the kidnapping of suspects and removal to secret foreign prisons for interrogation and torture). These policies explicitly violated long-established U.S. and international law. More than that, they fundamentally contradicted a core principle of American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States adheres to a higher ethical standard than other nations.

That claim had been violated throughout U.S. history, and ever more routinely during the Cold War when American-backed coups, assassinations, torture, and death squads were all common items on the nation's foreign policy résumé. In 1954, the famous general James Doolittle advised the Eisenhower administration that the Cold War required the United States to adopt "fundamentally repugnant" measures to fight its "implacable enemy." He warned, "There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive, long-standing concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered." Doolittle was preaching to the choir. Yet in those years the repugnant methods were never publicly acknowledged. The Vietnam War exposed them for all to see.

Even so, until the post-9/11 period, American officials continued to insist that the United States only resorted to military force in response to clear-cut acts of aggression by foreign forces. That wasn't true—the U.S. had many times acted as a preemptive, unilateral aggressor. But its stated policy never openly sanctioned the right to initiate war in the absence of hostile actions against the United States, its citizens, or allies. George Bush changed all that. With his "Bush Doctrine"—the policy of preemptive warfare—the United States claimed an "inherent right" to attack anyone anywhere in the world deemed by the government to pose an "imminent threat" to American security. Bush reserved to the United States the right to wage war merely in *anticipation* of *potential* hostile acts by others.

By the time the Abu Ghraib photos became public in the spring of 2004, the idea that Iraq had posed an "imminent threat" to the United States was completely discredited. The primary pretext of the war—that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction that he intended to use against us—proved to be utterly false. There were no WMD in Iraq. Nor was there any evidence to support the Bush administration's other major pretext for war—that there was a "sinister nexus" between Iraq and al-Qaeda. There was none. Iraq had nothing to do with the al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001.

After the rapid toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, Iraq descended into chaos. The U.S. occupation failed in every possible way. There was massive looting, disorder, displacement, unemployment, and human suffering—all played out in a wrecked country with no clear plan for

establishing security and reconstruction. The United States demobilized the entire Iraqi military, leaving 500,000 armed men unemployed and angry. They formed the basis of a growing anti-U.S. insurgency that escalated radically in the year after President Bush stood on the deck of the *Abraham Lincoln* (May 1, 2003) in front of a "Mission Accomplished" banner to declare the end of major combat. In fact, the war had only just begun. In the next year the insurgency intensified. The number of attacks on U.S. forces multiplied month by month. The insurgency was soon accompanied by a bloody civil war between Iraqi religious factions. U.S. troops were given the impossible task of creating order out of the chaos that U.S. policies had created.

Through it all, both the Bush and Obama administrations were desperate for any sign of good news, or at least some appeal to patriotism that might quiet dissent. In April 2004, just as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was exposed, the Bush administration believed it had found the ultimate example of patriotic sacrifice to honor and exploit—the death of Army Ranger Pat Tillman. Tillman had dropped out of a successful career in the National Football League to volunteer for military service. He had been so profoundly moved by the devastating losses of 9/11 that he was willing to forgo millions of dollars, in the prime of his athletic life, to fight for his country. On April 23, 2004, Tillman was killed in Afghanistan after already serving a tour in Iraq. On May 3, ESPN broadcast Pat Tillman's entire memorial service, with tributes from NFL players, coaches, and national figures like John McCain. One after another, they honored Tillman for his heroic service and for saving fellow Rangers in the face of hostile fire from the Taliban.

As the memorials to Tillman poured in, the military kept secret what it had known soon after Tillman's death—he had not been killed in a firefight, he had been shot by his own men. The only uncertainty was whether he had been killed by accident or intentionally. Yet high-ranking generals worked with the Pentagon and the White House to mislead the Tillman family and the American public. They created a fraudulent combat narrative and awarded Tillman a Silver Star for a battle that never happened. They stuck to the lie for five weeks until forced to admit a tentative version of the truth—"Corporal Tillman probably died as a result of friendly fire."

Tillman's death did not match the propaganda, nor did his political views. He opposed the war in Iraq even while he was fighting there. An army friend, Russell Baer, vividly recalls a day when they were watching U.S. bombs fall on an Iraqi city and Tillman said, "You know, this war is so fucking illegal." Though he was less critical of the war in Afghanistan, doubts rose there as well, and before he was killed he had contacted Noam Chomsky, the famous critic of U.S. foreign policy, in an effort to schedule a discussion with him after returning from Afghanistan. Shortly before his death Tillman told a friend that if he were to die he didn't "want them to parade me through the streets."

Though Pat Tillman was unable to return home to voice his objections to Bush's Global War on Terror, his brother Kevin did. He served in the same Ranger unit as Pat in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2006, on Pat's birthday, Kevin wrote an antiwar statement in honor of his brother, in which he mocked the long list of justifications the Bush administration had offered for the war in Iraq:

> Somehow we were sent to invade a nation because it was a direct threat to the American people, or to the world, or harbored terrorists, or was involved in the September 11 attacks, or received weapons-grade uranium from Niger, or had mobile weapons labs, or WMD, or had a need to be liberated, or we needed to establish a democracy, or stop an insurgency, or stop a civil war we created. . . .
>
> Our elected leaders were subverting international law and humanity by setting up secret prisons around the world, secretly kidnapping people, secretly holding them indefinitely, secretly not charging them with anything, secretly torturing them. Somehow that overt policy of torture became the fault of a few "bad apples" in the military.

The Pat Tillman story had once seemed such a perfect instrument for state propaganda: American volunteerism and patriotism at its finest with yet another bonus feature—a millionaire willing to serve his country for an enlisted man's pay. But, in fact, as U.S. casualties mounted along with antiwar sentiment, privileged volunteers, always rare, became scarcer. Sheer economic need was increasingly the primary driver of enlistment. Yet even the hard-pressed young proved increasingly difficult to recruit. Simply to replenish its ranks, the military had to increase its recruitment budget from $3.7 billion in 2004 to $7.7 billion in 2008. The onset of the Great Recession made the job a little easier, though recruitment budgets continued to rise.

The post-9/11 military was full of people like the children of Carlos Arredondo. Born in Costa Rica, Arredondo came to the United States as an undocumented worker—an "illegal alien." Through hard labor, primarily as a handyman, he carved out a life and began a family. "My two boys—they are my American dream," Carlos often said. The oldest, Alexander, enlisted in the marines at age seventeen after graduating from a Massachusetts vocational high school. He was exactly the type of kid military recruiters target—a first-generation working-class child of divorced parents who might be enticed by the promises of the armed forces. There were, to begin, the economic incentives—offers of career training, future college tuition, and a $10,000 signing bonus. Then came the cultural and psychological pitch—the military would build your confidence, make you feel proud, surround you with a community of intense comradeship, help you develop a new and more respected identity.

Alexander Arredondo enlisted one month before 9/11, with no war on the horizon. Three years later, in August 2004, on his second tour of duty, Alex was killed in Najaf, Iraq. When two marine officers arrived at his father's home to deliver the horrible news, it seemed to Carlos as if they were speaking in slow motion. They "used only like three words, but it was like the whole dictionary. . . . My heart went down to the ground. I stopped breathing. I just couldn't believe what they were saying." Shattered by grief, Carlos grabbed a gas can and propane torch, climbed into the marine van, splashed himself and the van with gasoline, and lit the torch. As the van went up in flames, the marines pulled Carlos out. He was badly burned and nearly died. Nine days later, on a stretcher, he attended Alex's funeral.

In the years that followed, Carlos became a fervent peace activist and, in 2006, an American citizen. A member of Gold Star Families for Peace, he often traveled around in a truck that was a "memorial on wheels" to Alexander and others who had died in Iraq. Carlos adorned it with every imaginable remembrance and relic of his dead son's life—childhood toys, Winnie-the-Pooh, a soccer ball, flowers, angels, combat fatigues, boots, military medals,

even a blown-up photograph of Alex at his wake, lying in his open coffin in his marine dress uniform. He also hauled around a full-size coffin covered in an American flag. Carlos was determined to confront people with the losses it was so easy for most to ignore. "As long as there are marines fighting and dying in Iraq, I'm going to share my mourning with the American people," he told a reporter in 2007.

The losses, for the Arredondo family, only deepened. In 2011, just before Christmas, the second son, Brian, hanged himself from the rafters of a shed in the backyard of his mother's house. It was not the first time he had attempted suicide. After Alex's death Brian began a long slide into depression, drug abuse, and violent encounters. His suicide came one day after U.S. troops were officially withdrawn from Iraq.

On April 15, 2013, Carlos was in Boston to support fifteen National Guardsmen who were marching in the Boston Marathon with forty-pound packs in honor of American soldiers who had died in Iraq and Afghanistan. This "Tough Ruck" team began its walk at 5:00 a.m. and crossed the finish line moments before the bombings that killed three people and wounded hundreds of others. They immediately rushed in to help the victims. So did Carlos Arredondo.

He was captured in a photograph the media instantly declared "iconic." It shows Carlos in a cowboy hat striding quickly alongside a wheelchair with his mouth open and his eyes fixed. His intense focus draws your eye. In the wheelchair sits a grievously wounded young man, ashen-faced and vacant-eyed. The man's legs are clearly mangled, though most media outlets did not show the worst of it, cropping the photograph just below the knee so you can't see that his lower legs have been blown away. If you look closely at Arredondo's right hand you can see that he is pinching off an artery that is jutting from the young man's thigh.

Arredondo's life experience makes vividly clear that many people who "support the troops" can also be deeply critical of the wars they are sent to fight. Cindy Sheehan is another example. She, like Carlos, joined Gold Star Families for Peace, having lost her son Casey in Iraq. In August 2005, Sheehan and some 1,500 other grieving parents and supporters set up a camp near President George W. Bush's Texas ranch in Crawford, Texas, while he was enjoying a five-week wartime vacation. She was there to

demand that Bush offer a plausible explanation for the war in Iraq, since every public pretext had proven false. She wanted Bush to admit that we were in Iraq for oil and to assert U.S. imperial power in the Middle East.

Cindy Sheehan and Carlos Arredondo had actually become by then more representative of the nation—of "who we are"—than President Bush. The prior year, 2004, a CBS/*New York Times* poll found that only 18 percent of Americans believed Bush was telling the full truth about Iraq. By June 2005, nearly 60 percent told pollsters the war in Iraq was not worth fighting and almost three-quarters said the casualties were unacceptable. A year later, in 2006, 72 percent of U.S. troops in Iraq said the United States should withdraw within a year. From August 2006 until U.S. military disengagement from Iraq in December 2011, at least 60 percent of Americans said they opposed the war. In many polls, opposition climbed to the high 60s.

That level of dissent is remarkable given the stunning initial impact of 9/11. Many people favored immediate retaliatory aggression. Just a few days after the horrifying attacks, Congress passed a resolution called the Authorization for Use of Military Force with only one dissenting vote. It gave the president the power to use "all necessary" force "against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons." It was, in other words, a blank check allowing the president to wage war anywhere he decided.

But most Americans were not willing to defer to the president indefinitely. In the months before Bush launched his "shock and awe" invasion of Iraq, millions of protesters came together in small town squares and major cities throughout the United States and the world to demonstrate against the impending war. These massive demonstrations—the largest global outpouring of antiwar dissent in history—were an unprecedented effort to stop a war before it could start.

Opposition soared despite one of the most intensive sales jobs in U.S. history. The Bush administration made its pitch for war with unequivocal arrogance. It said it knew with absolute certainty that Iraq possessed vast stockpiles of hideous weapons of mass destruction that posed an immediate and dire threat to global peace. The WMD included, it claimed,

"thousands of tons" of mustard gas, sarin nerve gas, VX nerve gas, anthrax, botulinum toxin, and possibly smallpox. Iraq had all that and more, the world was told, with nuclear weapons just around the corner. Anyone who challenged those claims was ridiculed.

Oddly, however, U.S. war planners did not seem especially worried about what all those WMD might do to their own troops. Having described Iraq as a lethal threat, they berated those who thought the war might be costly. As one adviser put it, victory was assured; the war would be a "cakewalk." There would be no need for an enormous force of three or four hundred thousand troops. Nor would U.S. casualties be high. Nor would the war be expensive—"something under $50 billion," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced. When Vice President Dick Cheney was asked if he worried that an invasion of Iraq might lead to a long Vietnam-like war against a hostile populace, he replied: "My belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators . . . I think it will go relatively quickly . . . weeks rather than months."

The flagrant contrast between the administration's prewar lies and arrogant assurances and the war's daily realities of car bombings, firefights, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and every possible form of human insecurity and suffering led to a rapid decline in public support. Although dissent was at least as broad as it was during the Vietnam era, there was not the same level of visible public protest. One reason is that the Internet provided so many semiprivate forms of protest. Instead of taking to the streets, people could go online to sign petitions, send around antiwar articles, or write their own. The 2011 Occupy movement was vivid and surprising in part because so many people were willing to come together in public protest and stay there.

Another explanation is that military service fell on such a small fraction of Americans, less than 1 percent of the population. Many troops served multiple tours of duty. It was easy for most Americans to ignore the war even while opposing it. Casualties mounted, but many Americans did not know anyone who had died or was wounded. Nor did most young Americans have to worry that they, too, might be ordered to fight. There was no draft looming over their lives. During the Vietnam War, that threat had

haunted an entire generation. Since the adoption of the all-volunteer force in 1973, it was possible to forget about distant wars altogether. They were outsourced to others.

Nor were older Americans asked to contribute anything to the Global War on Terror. In fact, even as President Bush was initiating the war in Afghanistan and planning one against Iraq he encouraged citizens to get back to the "business of America." Better yet, they should "fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida," the president urged. "Take your families and enjoy life."

Citizens were not called to service, they were sent on vacation. It was an especially strange message at a time when pundits were claiming that 9/11 had "changed everything," that the country would never be the same. And it clashed with the president's post-9/11 foreign policy—the Bush Doctrine—which seemed to suggest that the business of America was not to "enjoy life" but to prepare for a future of unlimited military interventions.

The apparent contradiction was resolved by a single obvious fact: the public was not to have anything to do with the president's foreign policy. The public had no role, but its exclusion included a payoff—it would be expected to do nothing. It would not have to fight. It would not even be expected to pay higher taxes to pay for the war. The Bush tax cuts would be preserved and the trillions of dollars required by the Global War on Terror would be paid with loans. The rich would continue to get richer. As the United States depended on an ever-smaller minority to do its fighting, the richest 20 percent came to own 84 percent of the nation's wealth. The bottom 60 percent owned less than 5 percent.

During the Vietnam years, there was a powerful political movement to address the most blatant economic and racial inequalities in American society. Though LBJ's Great Society never had the reach or funding to achieve its most ambitious goal—"to end poverty in our time"—it did help reduce the number of very poor Americans from 22 percent in 1963 to 13 percent in 1973, precisely the period when the American war in Vietnam was fought. The recent wars have been fought in a time of broadening inequality and economic crisis, capped off by the Great Recession, which began in 2008.

These distant, outsourced wars, fought as most Americans were struggling just to get by, were also profoundly confusing. It required close attention simply to understand some basic facts about the histories, cultures, religions, and factional disputes of Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly since Washington made no effort to distinguish or clarify them and media coverage declined as the wars continued. And it soon became clear that the United States was waging war in other nations as well with equally confusing histories. When Osama bin Laden was finally tracked down and killed in 2011, he was ensconced in Pakistan, not Afghanistan.

The war in Vietnam also had complicated details, yet many Americans had remained politically and emotionally engaged with that war for years. Millions empathized deeply with the suffering in Vietnam and some on the political left identified with the anti-American guerrillas, or at least with their fantasy of who they were. They chanted with approval, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF [National Liberation Front] is going to win!"

By contrast, almost no one in the United States cheered for the anti-American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. (In a final bit of irony, back in the 1980s it was the U.S. government that had actually supported Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran and also armed the rebels in Afghanistan who fought the Soviet Union and would later fight the United States.) The insurgents in both countries were so divided you needed a scorecard just to keep track of the key groups. And since the various tribal and religious sects did as much violence to each other as to the Americans, it was nearly impossible to identify a group that seemed capable of uniting their country and fostering peace. No U.S. protesters were recorded chanting in favor of Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army.

In the 1960s, many Americans were outraged by the lies officials told about Vietnam largely because there had once been such widespread faith in the government's claims about supporting freedom and democracy around the world. Vietnam taught subsequent generations to have a more skeptical view of how American power is exercised. Americans are no longer so shocked when their government prosecutes unsuccessful wars in distant places on false pretexts. Fewer people are surprised when evidence of U.S. wrongdoing surfaces, and fewer people feel so utterly betrayed. There is also a widespread belief that the military-industrial complex is permanent and unchangeable and will continue to operate by its own rules regardless of public opinion or media scrutiny.

That view was put most frankly by a Bush aide (widely believed to be Karl Rove). He derided the "reality-based community," people who judged the government based on a "judicious study of discernible reality." But "that's not the way the world really works anymore," the aide continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too. . . . We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

It is hard to imagine a more brazenly authoritarian description of executive power, especially from a White House insider. We are told that the government not only makes all meaningful decisions, but has the power to create whatever "reality"—real or illusory—it wants. Everyone else is left to stand aside and watch.

Equally striking is the claim that the United States is "an empire now." No modern president has ever dared to acknowledge that reality. Successful American politicians routinely deny imperial ambition or power. The story they prefer casts the United States as a reluctant giant. Global responsibility was thrust upon a peace-loving nation. America's exceptional institutions, values, and resources required it to assume world leadership. No other nation could be trusted to play the role so benignly. At the highest levels of power, that has remained the official claim in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

Since 9/11, however, many Americans from across the political spectrum have begun to acknowledge their nation's imperial status. Some on the political right share the left-wing concern that American empire is a bad thing—expensive, destructive, and antithetical to republican institutions. Yet many others have embraced the goal of global hegemony. The only common grievance among right-wing advocates of empire is that the United States is too timid in asserting its power. For them, America is not imperial enough.

A typical example came from the *Weekly Standard* only one month after

9/11. In "The Case for American Empire," Max Boot took on those who claimed that the terrorist attack against the United States was a consequence of American intervention in the Middle East going back to the early days of the Cold War. The attack was not an example of blowback, but the "result of insufficient American involvement and ambition." The correct response to terrorism, Boot claimed, was "to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation." We had not acted "as a great power should."

For Boot, the model to follow was the British Empire of old. "Afghanistan and other troubled lands today cry out for the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets." Historian Niall Ferguson agreed. The problem, however, was that the United States, unlike Britain in its imperial prime, was unwilling to exercise its global power with sufficient gusto. For Ferguson, U.S. incompetence as an empire stems from its failure to understand and embrace its imperial ambitions. "The United States is the empire that dare not speak its name. It is an empire in denial."

In 2003, for example, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told *Al Jazeera*, "We don't do empire." But as Ferguson rightly points out, "How can you not be an empire and maintain 750 military bases in three-quarters of the countries on earth?" The failure to own up to empire, he argues, makes the United States particularly dangerous and inept. Although it often intervenes with massive military power, it fails in the task of nation building because it does not want to impose full control. Ferguson takes it as a given that the United States *could* establish order and democratic rights if it tried.

That's where his argument collapses. He does not account for the enormous success of anticolonialism in the last century and the failure of one great power after another to maintain imperial control. Ferguson blithely suggests that the United States need only increase the size of its occupying forces, and its will to use them, and all would be well. On another cheerful note, he views a larger military as a means to employ a great deal of the nation's "raw material": "If one adds together the illegal immigrants, the jobless, and the convicts, there is surely ample raw material for a larger American army."

There haven't been such upbeat advocates of American empire since the days of Theodore Roosevelt. But recent decades have also inspired an influx of new anti-imperialists. Two of the most interesting—Andrew Bacevich and Chalmers Johnson—did not begin to question the fundamental legitimacy of American foreign policy until the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. Bacevich served as a junior officer in Vietnam, and Johnson was an Asia scholar who consulted with the CIA during the 1960s. Both had believed that waging war in Vietnam was justified by the Cold War conflict with Communism.

When the Cold War ended, they assumed the United States would greatly reduce its global military footprint and frequent interventions. It quickly became apparent, however, that American leaders wanted to maintain and even expand U.S. military power so that no one would dare to challenge the world's lone hyperpower, the new Rome. The persistent quest for "full-spectrum dominance" of the globe led Bacevich and Johnson to rethink all their assumptions about the history of U.S. foreign policy and to become leading critics of American imperialism.

Chalmers Johnson was particularly appalled by what he called the "empire of bases." In addition to six thousand military bases on American soil, the United States maintains nearly a thousand bases in 130 foreign countries if all the secret sites were acknowledged. Many U.S. bases are built on prime foreign land and garrison large numbers of American troops who are not subject to the constraints of local law. The mere presence of such overbearing projections of U.S. power and privilege can be enough to outrage local populations. When it is combined with GI rowdiness and crime, along with a continuous string of military interventions, covert operations, occupations, maneuvers, and war games, it is a perfect prescription for the spread of anti-American sentiment and, among some, the desire for retaliatory acts of violence.

Johnson introduced many readers to the CIA term for retaliation—"blowback." Blowback specifically refers to the unanticipated consequences of covert American operations that were kept secret from U.S. citizens but were widely known about and resented in the nations that were targeted. His book *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* was published the year *before* the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Tragically, it proved all too prescient. The secret CIA operation most directly related to 9/11 began in 1979, when the United States began to support an

anti-Soviet movement in Afghanistan. The United States was so determined to attack the Soviets by proxy, it gave no attention to the people it was helping, many of whom were extreme anti-Western jihadists. The Carter and Reagan administrations cared only that the rebels opposed Soviet imperialism. The most effective recruiter of foreign anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan was Osama bin Laden, who built and trained, partly with CIA-supplied cash and weapons, a private army from all over the Arab world. Once the Soviets were defeated, U.S. leaders lost interest in Afghanistan and the factions vying for power. When an extreme Islamic fundamentalist movement called the Taliban gained control of Kabul in 1996, it allowed bin Laden to establish al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. From there bin Laden soon declared war against the United States.

U.S. foreign policy in the *post*–Cold War world led people like Chalmers Johnson and Andrew Bacevich to rethink their view of the Cold War and the Vietnam War they had once supported. They began to share many of the views expressed by anti–Vietnam War critics in the 1960s—that U.S. military power and imperial interests undermined democracy at home and abroad, engendered anti-American hostility, stripped the nation of vital resources, and contradicted every claim of American exceptionalism. As Johnson put it in an interview twenty-five years after the Vietnam War ended, the antiwar movement of the 1960s had "grasped something essential about the nature of America's imperial role in the world that I had failed to perceive. For all their naiveté and unruliness, the protesters were right and American policy was wrong. I wish I had stood with them."

Recent wars have drawn criticism from a fascinating mix of people—left, liberal, libertarian, and conservative—who disagree on many issues but agree that the American empire must either close up shop or face a nastier, protracted collapse produced by bankruptcy or endless opposition, or both.

But critics have had an uphill battle. The foreign policy establishment has proved intensely resistant to change. Since World War II, all who have found a voice at its table, regardless of political party, have effectively signed a tacit oath to preserve U.S. military supremacy. Sometimes people within the establishment—whether from the White House, Pentagon, State Department, intelligence, defense industries, or think tanks—disagree about when, how, and where to utilize U.S. power, but no one can remain on the team unless they agree that the maintenance and exercise of military preeminence is a good thing for America and the world.

Since 9/11 an inflexible commitment to militarism and intervention led policymakers to throw aside even some of the most modest cautionary lessons of the Vietnam War. The career of Colin Powell provides a classic example. As a junior officer in Vietnam, Powell learned firsthand the difficulties of fighting a protracted and unpopular war with a complex, perhaps unachievable, mission. It led him, in the 1980s, to develop a pragmatic and sensible set of conditions that should apply before the United States committed itself to war. According to the Powell Doctrine, the United States should engage in war only if there is a compelling threat to U.S national security, only if there is broad public and international support, only if we have the sufficient means to achieve a timely and decisive victory, and only if there is a clear exit strategy in case of failure. Yet after 9/11, as President Bush's secretary of state, Powell threw aside his own principles and jumped on the interventionist bandwagon. Although the new wars he supported did not pass a single one of his own conditions, he did not want to give up his place on the team.

At least Powell pushed back a bit in private before helping to sell the policy in public. The key architects of the Global War on Terror shared none of Powell's reservations. For President Bush, Vice President Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the memory of the Vietnam War was irrelevant to the present. It provided no cautionary lessons. And significantly, none of them had a strong personal connection to the Vietnam War. They had neither fought in the war nor opposed it. They were determined to squash any comparisons between Vietnam and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They refused to use any expressions reminiscent of the Vietnam failure. Body count, insurgency, guerrilla, quagmire, escalation, search and destroy—all such language was forbidden.

During the Vietnam War, "body counts" epitomized the ruthless military strategy that made killing the paramount measure of U.S. success. In 2002, General Tommy Franks told journalists curtly, "We don't do body counts." His goal was to discourage any comparison to the Vietnam War. He also wanted to nix any questions about civilian casualties. We would count our own dead, but no others.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld belittled journalists who called the anti-American attacks in Iraq an insurgency. There were no "insurgents" or "guerrillas," Rumsfeld insisted, only "terrorists" or "regime remnants" or "dead-enders." When asked if there was an exit strategy for Iraq he said: "The goal is not to reduce the number of U.S. forces in Iraq. It is not to develop an exit strategy. Our exit strategy is success." When asked if the Iraq War was turning into a quagmire with no end in sight, he echoed Tommy Franks, "I don't do quagmires." He might just as well have said, "I don't do Vietnams."

However, it did not take long for the forbidden words to appear again. As the insurgency intensified, the administration could no longer deny it away. And evidence of progress was so scarce Bush eventually fell back on body counts to demonstrate military success. Near the end of 2006, the president told reporters: "Offensive operations by Iraq and coalition forces against terrorists and insurgents and death squad leaders have yielded positive results. In the months of October, November, and the first week of December, we have killed or captured nearly 5,900 of the enemy."

But body counts were no more a sign of progress in Iraq than they were in Vietnam. With no end in sight, the Bush administration stopped talking about bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq. It was finally time to think of an exit strategy, a way to establish just enough stability to allow the United States to withdraw without appearing to be defeated. In 2007, Bush announced a new approach, an increase in U.S. troops to provide more security and training until Iraqi forces could do the job themselves. Once again avoiding a Vietnam coded term—"escalation"—the buildup was called a "surge," a word sounding more muscular and temporary. Along with that came a much-hyped approach to the war called "counterinsurgency." Here, finally, was a Vietnam word that had been dusted off and reintroduced without embarrassment or denial.

In fact, counterinsurgency was suddenly celebrated as if it were a brand-new military philosophy, a novel strategy with its own acronym: COIN. The most famous apostle of COIN was General David Petraeus. He soon became a media sensation, especially among the hard-core supporters of the Iraq War. In 2008, the *Weekly Standard* described Petraeus as a divine

blessing: "God has apparently seen fit to give the U.S. Army a great general in this time of need."

As Petraeus well knew, counterinsurgency was not a new idea. The United States had fought insurgencies throughout much of its history, most obviously in Vietnam. And in the early 1960s, the Kennedy administration said it had a sophisticated understanding of counterinsurgency that would defeat the Viet Cong guerrillas of South Vietnam, not just by killing them on the battlefield but by winning the hearts and minds of the entire population. It was an utter failure. The vast majority of South Vietnamese never came to trust either the Americans or the U.S.-backed government in Saigon.

Counterinsurgency was so discredited by defeat in Vietnam that the military establishment did everything possible to expunge its memory. Post-Vietnam military training focused almost entirely on conventional, big-unit operations, with American troops preparing for major tank battles against the Soviet Union in places like the Fulda Gap, in Germany. Ambitious officers in the 1980s and '90s generally viewed counterinsurgency as a career killer.

But not David Petraeus. He believed COIN would be resurrected as an effective combat strategy, and he hitched his very large ambition to that faith. A 1974 graduate of West Point, Petraeus came of age as the Vietnam War was winding down. He never served there. For him, Vietnam was not a harrowing personal experience, but a fascinating case study to be mined for lessons. It became the subject of his 1987 Princeton PhD dissertation. The Vietnam War, he argued, led the military to conclude that neither the public nor civilian officials could tolerate long wars. No matter how well the military executed its mission—and Petraeus had only minor criticisms of the military's performance in Vietnam—the home front could not be trusted to support a long "dirty" war. Accordingly, Petraeus worried, the military came to doubt its ability "to conduct a successful large-scale counterinsurgency." Vietnam had a "chastening effect" on the military's "can-do" attitude and left it with too much "caution," "uncertainty," and "restraint." Though he couched his criticism politely, Petraeus believed the "frustrating experience of Vietnam" had been "traumatic" enough to "exercise

unwarranted tyranny over the minds of decision-makers." As a result, there had been no fresh thinking about counterinsurgency.

And for all the challenges of waging counterinsurgencies, Petraeus argued, the United States had to be prepared to fight them. In fact, it already was. Whatever reluctance the military establishment might have about fighting "nasty little wars," the United States was directly or indirectly involved in a dozen of them in the 1980s.

Starting in the late '80s, Petraeus cultivated a group of protégés who shared his faith in COIN and promoted it with such enthusiasm they began calling themselves COINdinistas, as if they were themselves insurgents within the American military command. The vast majority of their peers were skeptical or disdainful of COIN because it required so much. In addition to fighting, soldiers were expected to train foreign troops, provide basic services, cultivate political relationships, and carry out a variety of other activities dubbed "military operations other than war" (MOOTW). Many old-school hard-chargers spat out the acronym like a swearword: "*moot*-wah." "Real men don't do *moot*-wah!" one general was said to have claimed.

Petraeus was determined to prove that COIN could be cool, manly, and effective. Anyone who doubted it was welcome to join him for a blistering seven-mile run. In 2003, he had an opportunity to put his ideas into practice during his first tour in Iraq. As commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul he quickly realized that neither the Pentagon nor the Bush administration had a plan to secure or rebuild Iraq in the wake of the rapid defeat of Saddam Hussein and his army. As a result, Petraeus had complete latitude to implement his own. He turned his command into an exercise in nation building, hanging posters around his base reading "What Have You Done to Win Iraqi Hearts and Minds Today?"

In Mosul, the Petraeus legend soared. He was his own best promoter. Journalists were cultivated and visiting congressmen were treated to slick PowerPoint briefings showing the great achievements—roads constructed, electricity restored, police trained, insurgents pacified. Petraeus was held up as an innovator and intellectual, a thinking man's general, a man who could step into the most complex and volatile landscapes and work wonders. While the rest of Iraq descended into chaos, Petraeus seemed to be creating an oasis of security and hope.

That was the tenor of his positive press. A closer examination of the facts suggests a gloomier reality. Where Petraeus claimed to have replaced aggressive cordon and search operations with friendlier door knocking, as his yearlong tour continued he significantly escalated the number of violent raids and roundups of suspects. And far from pacifying Mosul, the number of insurgent attacks climbed steeply from 45 in June 2003, to 72 in August, to 121 in December.

And whatever he achieved soon came undone. In November 2004, the Mosul police force that Petraeus had trained and extolled quickly collapsed in response to an insurgent assault. Thirty-two hundred out of the city's four thousand policemen abandoned their posts in an act of mass, simultaneous desertion. The police chief was among the deserters. Insurgents captured hundreds of weapons, uniforms, and police cars. But because Petraeus was no longer in Mosul when the disaster hit, his reputation was undamaged.

In fact, it continued to grow, aided by an improbable literary success. Petraeus oversaw the 2007 publication of *The U.S. Army and Marine Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. It represented the first time in a generation that the two services had revised their counterinsurgency doctrine. When it was first posted online, it was downloaded more than two million times in two months. A paperback edition was soon published.

Given all that attention, you might expect the *Manual* to offer a ringing endorsement of counterinsurgency and specific new techniques for how to make it work. In fact, it offers neither. It is not a manual so much as a set of general principles served up with a basketful of caveats. COIN, we learn, is an "extremely complex form of warfare" that requires "unity of effort" at "every echelon," along with "patience," "mutual trust," and "public support." You have to understand the language, culture, and history of the "host" nation. You have to convince the people to support the government. You have to provide security and basic services. You have to keep the insurgents away from the people. You have to get reliable intelligence. You have to avoid killing civilians. And even if you do all of this and more, the result may not look anything like "victory." The best that might be achieved is an improved level of order and stability.

The emphasis on complexity may explain some of the *Manual*'s appeal. Many saw it as a sophisticated approach to the vexing challenges of

insurgency and nation building. Surely officers this smart would not make the same mistakes made in Vietnam. Oddly, however, the *Manual* mentions the Vietnam War only in passing. The most extended reference (two pages) praises that war's "most successful" COIN operation, a program called Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), which was "generally led, planned, and executed well." It offers only the mildest historical criticism. For example, "the body count only communicated a small part of the information commanders needed to assess their operations. It was therefore misleading."

Nor does the *Manual* provide detailed instructions on how to implement COIN best practices. It is full of vague, redundant platitudes like this: "Genuine compassion and empathy for the populace provide an effective weapon against insurgents." But how do you train soldiers in, say, Helmand Province to be compassionate toward a populace that includes many people who regard Americans as hostile invaders and want to kill them? And how can soldiers effectively win hearts and minds where they are also conducting "kill or capture" raids?

The *Manual* does not answer those questions. But it does insist that the military must produce positive stories about its mission. After all, counterinsurgency is largely a "war of perceptions." Commanders need to be "proactive" with the media in order to "ensure proper coverage." They must "help the media tell the story." It is crucial, for example, to keep "transmitting the repetitive themes of H[ost] N[ation] government accomplishments and insurgent violence against the populace." Whatever the reality, "proper coverage" stresses American success and insurgent evil. In the modern military's obsession with news management you can hear the echo of Bush's aide: *We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.*

Petraeus got the coverage he sought in Mosul despite the mounting insurgency. He was even more heralded once he took command of the entire war in June 2007. Within days of arriving, he gathered his top generals and urged them to cultivate reporters. "Sixty percent of this thing is information." But with the "surge" of 35,000 more troops, Petraeus was under great pressure to demonstrate actual progress.

With sectarian killing still rife in Baghdad, Petraeus directed attention to the "stunning reversal" in Anbar Province. It was true—there had been a

substantial decline in violence there, but much of it happened before Petraeus took command and before the U.S. surge. The main cause was the so-called Sunni Awakening—a movement filled with former anti-American insurgents who had lost so many lives to Shia militias and U.S. forces they were ready to cut a deal. In return for bags of cash handed out by the U.S. military, the Sunnis effectively policed the province and eventually other parts of Iraq. It was an old-fashioned payoff to former enemies.

The eventual decline in violence in Baghdad also had little to do with Petraeus or a new American strategy. Rather, the Shia militias had engaged in such effective ethnic cleansing that they controlled most of the city. The Sunnis (who had once controlled Baghdad) had been killed or pushed into their own sectarian enclaves. That produced at least a temporary lull in violence.

Despite the major media's coronation of "King David" Petraeus and his surge, the American people did not embrace the war. In fact, antiwar opinion increased. By 2009, a poll showed that only 24 percent of Americans believed the war was "worth the loss of American life and other costs of attacking Iraq." Yet many who turned against the war also turned away from it. It was easy to ignore, since the media had long since relegated Iraq to the back pages.

When the United States finally withdrew in 2011, President Obama claimed that we had left behind a "sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq." In fact, the U.S. departed a catastrophe it had created. Iraq remained a shattered nation. There was still no peace, no national reconciliation, no real democracy, and no significant rebuilding. The infrastructure was far worse than it was prior to the U.S. invasion. More than two million people had fled the nation, including a large number of the most skilled. The Iraqi government ranked as one of the three most corrupt in the world. Women had fewer rights and opportunities than before the war. There was more ethnic segregation. Nearly 200,000 Iraqis have died as a direct result of the violence initiated by the U.S. invasion, the majority of them civilians. Even more have died from war-related diseases and deprivations. The American losses were by far the greatest since Vietnam—4,489 service members and at least 1,500 civilian contractors. The economic cost was staggering—now projected to be $2–3 trillion. Before the invasion, al-Qaeda had no presence

in Iraq. Shortly after U.S. withdrawal al-Qaeda was conducting forty mass-casualty attacks per month. In July 2013 an al-Qaeda raid on Abu Ghraib prison freed nearly a thousand inmates, including many al-Qaeda members.

When Barack Obama assumed the presidency in January 2009, he shifted the focus to Afghanistan—the "necessary" war he had promised to win. *Newsweek* immediately dubbed it "Obama's Vietnam."

> The parallels are disturbing: the president, eager to show his toughness, vows to do what it takes to "win." The nation that we are supposedly rescuing is no nation at all but rather a deeply divided, semi-failed state with an incompetent, corrupt government held to be illegitimate by a large portion of its population.
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> But by the time Obama took over, policymakers had been ignoring every significant Vietnam parallel for almost a decade. Nor were they likely to find other historical examples relevant—such as the fact that two previous empires, the British and Soviet, had failed miserably in their efforts to pacify Afghanistan. Instead of heeding those warnings, the Obama administration added 35,000 more troops.

Despite *Newsweek*'s long-overdue cautionary note, it held out hope that the surge in Afghanistan would produce the same positive results it ascribed to the surge in Iraq. Perhaps General Petraeus, "architect of the successful surge in Iraq," will "pull off another miraculous transformation." Or, short of that, perhaps the surge would at least impose enough temporary "order" to allow the United States to withdraw without humiliation. That was a Vietnam parallel not commonly mentioned. Once again, as in Vietnam, U.S. policymakers would respond to failing wars by seeking an image-saving withdrawal, a way to preserve some semblance of American virtue, honor, and power.

There were no miracles in Iraq or Afghanistan. The 2010 Obama surge in Afghanistan produced no decline in attacks on U.S.-NATO forces. In fact, the number of IED attacks increased from 250 per month in June 2009 to 1,258 in August 2010. And for all of the COIN rhetoric about offering protection to the civilian population, the United States greatly increased the number of "kill or capture" raids (from twenty each month in early 2009 to as many as a thousand a month in 2010). These "targeted" assassinations were typically conducted in the middle of the night, so when Special Operations Forces burst into homes it was difficult to sort out the "targets" from their relatives. Everyone was at least traumatized, if not wounded or killed.

Perhaps Obama's most significant "surge" was his increasing use of drones to assassinate terrorist suspects in foreign countries. These pilotless, missile-carrying aircraft are operated by Americans at distant bases, often thousands of miles away from their targets. Obama has ordered hundreds of drone attacks, far exceeding the Bush administration. Most of them have been in countries with which we are not officially at war—especially Pakistan, but also Yemen and Somalia. Although Obama rejected Bush's phrase "Global War on Terrorism" (he prefers to describe his warfare as "persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks"), his policies have nonetheless made U.S. military intervention ever more global.

Drone advocates tout their new instrument of techno-war as a surgically precise way to kill terrorists without jeopardizing American lives. U.S. intelligence agencies simply provide the president with a "kill list" of names of "known terrorists" and he decides whether to authorize a drone strike against them. Strikes are also authorized on people whose identities are not known, as long as their "pattern of life activity" convinces the CIA that they are involved in terrorist activity. These assassinations are known as signature strikes. A few thousand people have already been killed by drone strikes and yet Congress has still not stepped in to pass judgment on the legality, morality, accuracy, or effectiveness of this new form of warfare. Nor, to date, has the president expressed any concern about the obvious possibility that drone attacks will inspire violent retaliatory blowback against American citizens.

Public criticism has grown, but the major media have been slow to pick up the outcry and challenge official claims. Quite apart from the important question of whether it is right to assassinate anyone—even "known" terrorists—it soon became clear that drones were not nearly as precise as promised. On June 23, 2009, for example, a drone attack in Pakistan struck a funeral procession for a Taliban leader and killed at least eighty people. The major media mostly ignored the story, focusing instead on the death of

Michael Jackson and the affair of a South Carolina governor. An estimated 400–1,000 Pakistani civilians have died from U.S. drone strikes. At least 164 of the victims were children. Imagine the reaction if foreign drones hovered constantly over American soil with such deadly results, or what will happen when they do, since the United States has no monopoly on the technology.

Despite Obama's rhetoric about a more precise and targeted war on terror, our mass-surveillance state operates on the assumption that enemies could lurk anywhere and everywhere on the planet—including within the United States—and so everyone should be watched. That assumption is not unprecedented in U.S. history. In the early Cold War, McCarthyism flourished because of vastly inflated fears that spies and traitors were selling out America, from the State Department to the local library. In those years an enormous, permanent intelligence apparatus was put into place. But even the Cold War surveillance system was dwarfed after 9/11. The effort to identify a relatively small number of terrorists has fueled the creation of a global dragnet so colossal no one may ever be able to map it all.

A two-year investigation by the *Washington Post* identified more than three thousand government and private organizations working on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security, and intelligence. Nearly a million people with top secret security clearances were hired to participate in this massive network of domestic and foreign spying. Since 9/11 the office space for these activities has expanded by seventeen million square feet, the equivalent of twenty-two U.S. Capitol buildings. Officials insist this top secret world is necessary to keep the United States safe, but it is impossible to evaluate its effectiveness because it is so invisible, so large, so redundant, and so completely shielded from public oversight. No one even knows how much it all costs.

Given the vast expansion of America's mass-surveillance state, a visitor from outer space might assume that the United States had suffered dozens of attacks on the scale of 9/11. In fact, the number of American victims of foreign terrorism is surprisingly low. According to a report sponsored by the conservative Heritage Foundation, acts of international terrorism directed at the United States from 1969 to 2009 killed about 5,600 people (the killings of 9/11 were responsible for the majority of those deaths). The horror and pain of the 9/11 attacks cannot be diminished by averaging the human losses from foreign terrorism over a forty-year span (140 victims per year), but public understanding of the threat does require perspective. After all, more than 30,000 Americans are killed *every year* in car accidents, about 15,000 are murdered, and more than 400,000 die from tobacco-related illnesses.

Since we cannot replay history, there is no way to prove that we would be as safe or safer had we treated terrorism as a serious crime rather than a global war. But we can be sure that our vastly disproportionate response to 9/11 has created deeper global hostility toward U.S. foreign policy and has thus created the conditions for ever more dangerous reprisals in the future.

Will any of this history bring us to a fundamental reconsideration of our role in the world? Will candidates for president continue to describe the United States as the greatest force for good in the world, thus requiring our endless assertion of global dominance? Or will we begin to regard ourselves as a nation among nations in an ever more interdependent world with no unique right or ability to impose our will?

The claims of American exceptionalism are not easily jettisoned. They are repeated like a catechism even in times of loss and tragedy. For example, the day after the Boston Marathon bombings of April 15, 2013, President Barack Obama paid tribute to those who aided the victims. There was much to praise. Not just cops and first responders, but a wide variety of citizens like Carlos Arredondo rushed toward the scene of the bomb blasts to clear away debris and help the wounded. They ripped off belts and pieces of clothing to make tourniquets. They clung to torn limbs. They carried people to safety. They comforted and encouraged. They donated blood. Some people who had completed the twenty-six-mile run pitched in despite their exhaustion.

President Obama applauded Boston's "stories of heroism and kindness, generosity and love," but his tribute did not stop there. He made a larger claim. The virtue of individuals was made to represent the entire nation: "If you want to know who we are, what America is, how we respond to evil—that's it. Selflessly. Compassionately. Unafraid."

Flattering words like these are seductive, thrilling in triumph and consoling in loss. We are an exceptionally good and caring people; a good and

caring nation. The people and the nation are one. Who "we" are and America "is" are identical. We—and it—rise to the occasion. We look out for others. The faith in American exceptionalism is so often repeated and reinforced it has the authority of settled truth. To challenge its validity strikes many as mean-spirited, even seditious.

Indeed, the faith is so well guarded, evidence that contradicts it is automatically marginalized or denied. Wrongdoing or failure is dismissed. It is "not who we are." In terms of our national identity, we seem incapable of saying in public what gets said routinely in houses of worship every week across the country—that we are all a mix of good and bad, that we are human beings and thus inherently flawed, all too capable of violence and sin. Yet we do not apply that basic understanding of human nature to our national identity.

In 2010, a *USA Today*/Gallup poll asked Americans the following: "Because of the United States' history and its Constitution, do you think the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, or don't you think so?" Eighty percent agreed. The same poll found that two-thirds of Americans agreed that the United States has a "special responsibility to be the leading nation in world affairs."

That's a remarkable sign that American exceptionalism persists, even if you factor in how the questions encourage affirmative responses by supplying their own positive spin ("greatest country in the world," "special responsibility"). Yet polls like that may reflect wishful thinking more than concrete understanding, a desire to maintain a traditional faith even while recognizing that it rests on shaky ground. They may simply show that Americans still love the *idea* of living in the greatest nation on earth, even when the reality is less and less convincing. For when you ask Americans specific questions about the state of the nation, they are rarely so positive. Ask about public education or the infrastructure, ask about jobs and the economy, rising debt and economic inequality, Congress and the big banks, the prison system and health care, environmental degradation and climate change, crime and gun violence, foreign policy and war. When you do, it is clear that Americans can be very tough critics of their own nation. Many realize that the United States is not number one (or even in the top ten) in many important categories. People are deeply worried about the country's current state and future prospects, neither of which seems exceptionally bright.

The Vietnam War and the history that followed exposed the myth of America's persistent claim to unique power and virtue. Despite our awesome military, we are not invincible. Despite our vast wealth, we have gaping inequalities. Despite our professed desire for global peace and human rights, since World War II we have aggressively intervened with armed force far more than any nation on earth. Despite our claim to have the highest regard for human life, we have killed, wounded, and uprooted many millions of people, and unnecessarily sacrificed many of our own.

Since the height of the Vietnam War many Americans have challenged the idea that their nation has the right or capacity to assert global dominance. Indeed, the public is consistently more opposed to war than its government. Yet there remains a profound disconnect between the ideals and priorities of the public and the reality of a permanent war machine that no one in power seems able or willing to challenge or constrain. That machine has been under construction for seventy-five years and has taken on a virtual life of its own, committed to its own survival and growth, unaccountable to the public, and protected by many layers of secrecy. It defends itself against anyone who seeks to curb its power. The tiny elite that makes U.S. foreign policy enhances and deploys the nation's imperial power, but has never fundamentally questioned or reduced it. Congress has consistently been bypassed or has itself abdicated its constitutional responsibility to play a decisive role in matters of war and peace. When it does act, it is mostly to rubber-stamp military spending and defer to executive branch authority. The persistence of warmongering in the corridors of power has systematically eroded the foundations of democratic will and governance. The institutions that sustain empire destroy democracy.

But the public is not blameless. As long as we continue to be seduced by the myth of American exceptionalism, we will too easily acquiesce to the misuse of power, all too readily trust that our force is used only with the best of intentions for the greatest good. If so, a future of further militarism and war is virtually guaranteed. Perhaps the only basis to begin real change is to seek the fuller reckoning of our role in the world that the Vietnam War so powerfully awakened—to confront the evidence of what we have done. It is our record; it is who we are.

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298 **only 13 percent believed the U.S. military:** Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows*, p. 82.

299 **"the Fairness Doctrine is in play":** Naureckas, "Gulf War Coverage."

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