American Empire

Examining the hidden costs and consequences of America's "lone superpower" status

Excerpted from
The Sorrows of Empire by Chalmers Johnson and other sources

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Mission statement (online)
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Prologue: The Unveiling of the American Empire

Acknowledgement and Awareness

Most Americans do not recognize—or do not want to recognize—that the United States dominates the world through its military power. Our country deploys well over half a million soldiers, spies, technicians, teachers, dependents, and civilian contractors in other nations. Our vast network of American military bases straddles every continent except Antarctica and these military and intelligence installations bring profits to civilian industries, which design and manufacture weapons for the armed forces or undertake contract services to build and maintain our far-flung outposts.

Whole sectors of the American economy have come to rely on the military for sales; from the obvious construction of military aircraft and armored vehicles to the not so obvious non-military spin-offs (On the eve of our second war on Iraq, for example, the Defense Department ordered 273,000 bottles of Native Tan sunblock (SPF 15) from Sun Fun Products of Daytona Beach, Florida).

Gathering Strength
The new American empire has been a long time in the making. During the almost fifty years of superpower standoff, the United States denied that its activities constituted a form of imperialism. Our foreign interventions were just reactions to the menace of the "evil empire" of the USSR and its satellites. Only slowly did we Americans become aware that the role of the military was growing in our country and that the executive branch—the "imperial presidency"—was eroding the democratic underpinnings of our constitutional republic.

By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, our leaders had become so accustomed to dominance over half the globe that the thought of giving it up was inconceivable. Many Americans simply concluded that they had "won" the Cold War and so deserved the imperial fruits of victorious "good empire". After all, it had no colonies and its massive military forces were deployed around the world only to maintain "stability," or guarantee "mutual security." We were there merely to promote a liberal world order based on free elections and American-style "open markets."

A Stark Change
Americans like to say that the world changed after September 11, 2001. The American people were still largely in the dark about why they had been attacked by terrorists or why the State Department began warning them against traveling overseas to an ever-growing list of foreign countries.

"Why do they hate us?" was a common complaint heard on talk shows, and the most common answer was "jealousy." But a growing number finally began to grasp what most non-Americans already knew and had experienced over the previous half century—namely, that the United States was something other than what it professed to be… That it was, in fact, more than just a "lone superpower" but a powerful military empire often cloaked in secrecy and sadly frequently operating outside the jurisdiction of International Law.

A Network of Entanglement
The American militarized empire is a physical reality with a distinct way of life but even more important, it is also a network of economic and political interests tied in a thousand different ways to American corporations, universities, and communities.

Although the aforementioned “veil of economic and political interests” has been kept separate and dutifully understated from what passes for everyday life back in what has only recently come to be known as "the homeland;" that sense of separation is disappearing—for the changing nature of the empire is changing our society as well.
What is an Empire?

Controlled access to resources and a sense of global mission...

An empire exists when one nation exercises long-term domination over one or more external nations or societies. Those who hold power at the center of an empire derive

- economic benefits
- access to important resources
- control of militarily strategic territory
- and other forms of power

and are able to determine many of the key political, social, economic and cultural outcomes or the territories they control.

The interactive map illustrates the territorial expanse of a few of the major empires. Although throughout ancient and more recent colonial history, the word “empire” was positively embraced—as in the cases of the Spanish, British or Russian empires—for Americans, the word has always had negative connotations and rarely used.

Like Rome, Britain or any of the other empires before it, America is a vast, multicultural state, burdened with an expensive and overstretched military, uneasy about its porous borders, with a messianic sense of global mission and a tendency to misunderstand and belittle foreign cultures.

Jonathan Freedland's astute historical comparison below details both the benefits and burdens Rome and America share as empires.

The New Roman Empire?

Now the United States dominates the world. Are the Americans the new Romans?

by Jonathan Freedland

America's policies determine economic, political, military and cultural outcomes for very large parts of the world. The most obvious similarity between Rome and the U.S. is overwhelming military strength. Rome was the superpower of its day, boasting an army with the best training, biggest budgets and finest equipment the world had seen. No one else came close. The U.S. is just as dominant—its defense budget will soon be bigger than the military spending of the next nine countries combined, allowing it to deploy forces almost anywhere on the planet at lightning speed. Throw in its technological lead, and the U.S. emerges as a power without rival.

There is a big difference, of course. Apart from the odd Puerto Rico or Guam, the U.S. does not have formal colonies, the way the Romans did. There are no American consuls or viceroys directly ruling faraway lands.

But that difference between ancient Rome and modern Washington may be less significant than it looks. After all, America has done plenty of conquering and colonizing. For some historians, the founding of America and its 19th-century push westward were no less an exercise in empire building than Rome's drive to take charge of the Mediterranean. While Julius Caesar took on the Gauls—bragging that he had slaughtered a million of them—American pioneers battled the Cherokee, the Iroquois and the Sioux.

"From the time the first settlers arrived in Virginia from England and started moving westward, this was an imperial nation, a conquering nation," says Paul Kennedy, author of The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers.
Global Muscle
More to the point, the U.S. has military bases, or base rights, in some 40 countries—giving it the same global muscle it would enjoy if it ruled those countries directly. According to Chalmers Johnson, author of Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire, these U.S. military bases are today's version of the imperial colonies of old. Washington may refer to them as "forward deployment", says Johnson, but they are colonies nonetheless. On this definition, there is almost no place outside America's reach.

So the U.S. may be more Roman than we realize, with garrisons in every corner of the globe. But there the similarities only begin. For the U.S. approach to empire looks quintessentially Roman. It's as if the Romans bequeathed a blueprint for how imperial business should be done—and today's Americans follow it religiously.

Lesson One in the Roman handbook for imperial success would be a realization that it is not enough to have great military strength: the rest of the world must know that strength—and fear it. The Romans used the propaganda technique of their time—gladiatorial games in the Colosseum—to show the world how hard they were. Today 24-hour news coverage of U.S. military operations, including video footage of smart bombs scoring direct hits, or Hollywood shoot-'em-ups at the multiplex serve the same function. Both tell the world: this empire is too tough to beat.

Superior Technology
The U.S. has learned a second lesson from Rome, realizing the centrality of technology. For the Romans, it was those famously straight roads, enabling the empire to move troops or supplies at awesome speeds—rates that would not be surpassed for well over a thousand years. It was a perfect example of how one imperial strength tends to feed another: an innovation in engineering, originally designed for military use, went on to boost Rome commercially.

Today those highways find their counterpart in the information superhighway: the Internet also began as a military tool, devised by the U.S. Defense Department, and now stands at the heart of American commerce. In the process, it is making English the Latin of its day—a language spoken across the globe. The U.S. is proving what the Romans already knew: that once an empire is a world leader in one sphere, it soon dominates in every other.

The Power of Seduction
But it is not just specific tips that the U.S. seems to have picked up from its ancient forebears. Rather, it is the fundamental approach to empire that echoes so loudly. Rome understood that, if it was to last, a world power needed to practice both hard imperialism, the business of winning wars and invading lands, and soft imperialism, the cultural and political tricks that worked not to win power but to keep it.

So Rome's greatest conquests came not at the end of a spear, but through its power to seduce conquered peoples. As Tacitus observed in Britain, the natives seemed to like togas, baths and central heating—never realizing that these were the symbols of their "enslavement".

Today the U.S. offers the people of the world a similarly coherent cultural package, a cluster of goodies that remain reassuringly uniform. It's not togas or gladiatorial games today, but Starbucks, Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Disney, all paid for in the contemporary equivalent of Roman coinage, the global hard currency of the 21st century: the dollar.

When the process works, you don't even have to resort to direct force; it is possible to rule by remote control, using friendly client states. This is a favorite technique for the contemporary U.S.—no need for colonies when you had the Shah in Iran or Pinochet in Chile to do the job for you—but the Romans got there first. They ruled by proxy whenever they could.
Not that it always worked. Rebellions against the empire were a permanent fixture, with barbarians constantly pressing at the borders. Some accounts suggest that the rebels were not always fundamentally anti-Roman; they merely wanted to share in the privileges and affluence of Roman life. If that has a familiar ring, consider this: several of the enemies who rose up against Rome are thought to have been men previously nurtured by the empire to serve as pliant allies. Need one mention former U.S. protégé Saddam Hussein or one-time CIA trainee Osama bin Laden?

**Heroes and Myths**

Internally, too, today's U.S. would strike many Romans as familiar terrain. America's mythologizing of its past—its casting of founding fathers Washington and Jefferson as heroic titans, its folk-tale rendering of the Boston Tea Party and the war of independence—is very Roman.

That empire, too, felt the need to create a mythic past, starred with heroes. For them it was Aeneas and the founding of Rome, but the urge was the same: to show that the great nation was no accident, but the fruit of manifest destiny.

There are some large differences between the two empires, of course—starting with self-image. Romans reveled in their status as masters of the known world, but few Americans would be as ready to brag of their own imperialism. Most would deny it. But that may come down to the U.S.'s founding myth. For America was established as a rebellion against empire, in the name of freedom and self-government. Raised to see themselves as a rebel nation and plucky underdog, they cannot quite accept their current role as master.

**Will History Repeat Itself?**

One last factor scares Americans from making a parallel between themselves and Rome: that empire declined and fell. The historians say this happens to all empires; they are dynamic entities that follow a common path, from beginning to middle to end.

"What America will need to consider in the next 10 or 15 years," says the Cambridge classicist Christopher Kelly, "is what is the optimum size for a non-territorial empire, how interventionist will it be outside its borders, what degree of control will it wish to exercise, how directly, how much through local elites? These were all questions which pressed upon the Roman empire."

Anti-Americans like to believe that the “pre-emptive” operation in Iraq might be proof that the U.S. is succumbing to the temptation that ate away at Rome: overstretch. But it's just as possible that the U.S. is merely moving into what was the second phase of Rome's imperial history, when it grew frustrated with indirect rule through allies and decided to do the job itself. Which is it?

Is the U.S. at the end of its imperial journey, or on the brink of its most ambitious voyage? Only the historians of the future can tell us that.
Imperial Overstretch

Black Budgets Beyond Control?

With the Second World War, our nation emerged as the richest and most powerful on earth and a self-designated successor to the British Empire. But as enthusiastic as some of our wartime leaders, particularly President Franklin D. Roosevelt, were for the task, the American people were not. They demanded that the country demobilize its armies and turn the nation's attention to full employment and domestic development. Peace did not last long, however. The Cold War and a growing conviction that vital interests, even national survival, demanded the "containment" of the Soviet Union helped turn an informal empire begun during World War II into hundreds of installations around the world for the largest military we ever maintained in peacetime.

As of September 2001, the Department of Defense acknowledged at least 725 American military bases existed outside the United States. Actually, there are many more, since some bases exist under leaseholds, informal agreements, or disguises of various kinds. It includes expensive, permanent garrisons built between 1999 and 2001 in such unlikely places as Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Resorts and Learjets

America's modern empire of bases also has its entertainment and getaway spots, such as the armed forces' ski and vacation center at Garmisch in the Bavarian Alps, its resort hotel in downtown Tokyo, and the 234 military golf courses it operates worldwide, not to mention the seventy-one Learjets, thirteen Gulfstream IIIs, and seventeen Cessna Citation luxury jets used to fly admirals and generals to such spots. At a cost of $50 million apiece, each Gulfstream accommodates twelve passengers plus two pilots, one flight engineer, a communications systems operator, and a flight attendant.

The raw monetary figures have been literally astronomical. From Reagan's 1983 "Star Wars" speech to 2006, depending on which expert you listen to, the United States has spent between $92.5 billion and $130 billion on the basic problem of shooting down an ICBM in flight—and that's without even once having succeeded in doing so. One comprehensive analysis of the ultimate cost of the entire ballistic missile defense system by its distinctly theoretical date of completion in 2015—and excluding its most expensive and problematic component, a space-based laser—is $1.2 trillion.

Staggering Debt

On February 6, 2006, the Bush administration submitted to Congress a $439 billion defense appropriation budget for fiscal 2007. At the same time, the deficit in the United States' current account—the imbalance in the trading of goods and services as well as the shortfall in all other cross-border payments from interest income and rents to dividends and profits on direct investments—underwent its fastest-ever quarterly deterioration. In the fourth quarter of 2005, the deficit hit a staggering $225 billion, up from $185.4 billion in the previous quarter. For all of 2005, the current account deficit was $805 billion, 6.4 percent of national income. In 2005, the U.S. trade deficit, the largest component of the current account deficit, soared to an all-time high of $725.8 billion, the fourth consecutive year that America's trade debts set records. The trade deficit with China alone rose to $201.6 billion, the highest imbalance ever recorded with any country. Meanwhile, since mid-2000, the country has lost nearly three million manufacturing jobs.

Among the creditors that finance these unprecedented sums, the two largest are the central banks of China (with $853.7 billion in reserves) and Japan (with $831.58 billion in reserves), both of which are the managers of the huge trade surpluses these countries enjoy with the United States. This helps explain why our debt burden has not yet
triggered what standard economic theory would dictate: a steep decline in the value of the U.S. dollar followed by a severe contraction of the American economy when we found we could no longer afford the foreign goods we like so much. So far, both the Chinese and Japanese governments continue to be willing to be paid in dollars in order to sustain American purchases of their exports.

**Corporate "Outsourcing"—Crony Contracts**

Many other aspects of imperialism and militarism are undermining America's constitutional system. By now, for example, the privatization of military and intelligence functions is totally out of control, beyond the law, and beyond any form of congressional oversight. It is also incredibly lucrative for the owners and operators of so-called private military companies—and the money to pay for their activities ultimately comes from taxpayers through government contracts. Any accounting of these funds, largely distributed to crony companies with insider connections, is chaotic at best. Jeremy Scahill, author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, estimates that there are 126,000 private military contractors in Iraq, more than enough to keep the war going, even if most official U.S. troops were withdrawn. "From the beginning," Scahill writes, "these contractors have been a major hidden story of the war, almost uncovered in the mainstream media and absolutely central to maintaining the U.S. occupation of Iraq."

America's massive "military" budgets, still on the rise, are beginning to threaten the U.S. with bankruptcy, given that its trade and fiscal deficits already easily make it the world's largest net debtor nation. Spending on the military establishment – sometimes mislabeled "defense spending"—has soared to the highest levels since World War II, exceeding the budgets of the Korean and Vietnam War eras as well as President Ronald Reagan's weapons-buying binge in the 1980s. According to calculations by the National Priorities Project, a nonprofit research organization that examines the local impact of federal spending policies, military spending today consumes 40 percent of every tax dollar.

**Black Budgets**

Equally alarming, it is virtually impossible for a member of Congress or an ordinary citizen to obtain even a modest handle on the actual size of military spending or its impact on the structure and functioning of our economic system. Some $30 billion of the official Defense Department (DOD) appropriation in the current fiscal year is "black," meaning that it is allegedly going for highly classified projects. Even the open DOD budget receives only perfunctory scrutiny because members of Congress, seeking lucrative defense contracts for their districts, have mutually beneficial relationships with defense contractors and the Pentagon. President Dwight D. Eisenhower identified this phenomenon, in the draft version of his 1961 farewell address, as the "military-industrial-[congressional] complex." Forty-six years later, in a way even Eisenhower probably couldn't have imagined, the defense budget is beyond serious congressional oversight or control.

The DOD always tries to minimize the size of its budget by representing it as a declining percentage of the gross national product. What it never reveals is that total military spending is actually many times larger than the official appropriation for the Defense Department.
**Calculated National Security Budget(s)**

*Real outlay is in the trillions...*

For fiscal year 2006, Robert Higgs of the Independent Institute calculated national security outlays at almost a trillion dollars – $934.9 billion to be exact – broken down as follows (in billions of dollars):

- Department of Defense: $499.4
- Department of Energy (atomic weapons): $16.6
- Department of State (foreign military aid): $25.3
- Department of Veterans Affairs (treatment of wounded soldiers): $69.8
- Department of Homeland Security (actual defense): $69.1
- Department of Justice (1/3rd for the FBI): $1.9
- Department of the Treasury (military retirements): $38.5
- NASA (satellite launches): $7.6
- Interest on war debts, 1916-present: $206.7

*Totaled, the sum is larger than the combined sum spent by all other nations on military security*

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This spending helps sustain the national economy and represents, essentially, a major jobs program. However, it is beginning to crowd out the civilian economy, causing stagnation in income levels. It also contributes to the hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs to other countries. On May 1, 2007, the Center for Economic and Policy Research released a series of estimates on "the economic impact of the Iraq war and higher military spending." Its figures show, among other things, that, after an initial demand stimulus, the effect of a significant rise in military spending (as we've experienced in recent years) turns negative around the sixth year.

Sooner or later, higher military spending forces inflation and interest rates up, reducing demand in interest-sensitive sectors of the economy, notably in annual car and truck sales. Job losses follow. The nonmilitary construction and manufacturing sectors experience the largest share of these losses. The report concludes, "Most economic models show that military spending diverts resources from productive uses, such as consumption and investment, and ultimately slows economic growth and reduces employment."
In the eyes of most Americans, the United States has remained at worst an "informal" empire. After all, it had no colonies and its massive military forces are deployed around the world only to maintain "stability," or guarantee "mutual security," or promote a liberal world order based on free elections and American-style "open markets."

Yet not including the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, we now station over half a million U.S. troops, spies, contractors, dependents, and others on military bases located in more than 130 countries, many of them presided over by dictatorial regimes that have given their citizens no say in the decision to let us in.

As but one striking example of imperial basing policy: For the past 61 years, the U.S. military has garrisoned the small Japanese island of Okinawa with 37 bases. Smaller than Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands, Okinawa is home to 1.3 million people who live cheek-by-jowl with 17,000 Marines of the 3rd Marine Division and the largest U.S. installation in East Asia—Kadena Air Force Base. There have been many Okinawan protests against the rapes, crimes, accidents, and pollution caused by this sort of concentration of American troops and weaponry, but so far the U.S. military has deftly been able to ignore them.

Our occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq turned into major fiascoes, discrediting our military leadership, ruining our public finances, and bringing death and destruction to hundreds of thousands of civilians in those countries.

Whether Americans intended it or not, we are now seen around the world as

- approving the torture of captives (at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq among others),
- enabling a global network of secret CIA prisons,
- electing a President / Commander-in-chief who operates beyond the constraints of the Constitution or international law.

Tragically, we are now saddled with a rigged economy based on record-setting trade and fiscal deficits, the most secretive and intrusive government in our country's memory, and the pursuit of "preventive" war as a basis for foreign policies.

View an interactive map of America's military presence around the world >
There are people all around the globe who hate America. Although it has always been that way, anti-Americanism is increasingly gaining strength. We are often told foreigners hate us because they are jealous of our privileges, our freedoms, or our wealth. In reality, they disagree and despise the impact the policies of the U.S. has—not only on their lives—but on the entire world.

History is replete with dozens of examples of where American covert activities and overt foreign policy has thoroughly and callously undermined the very values that the American government so publicly and loudly proclaims. Americans tend not to see this, because they are unconcerned with the rest of the world and tend to uncritically trust their government to do the right thing. Seldom do they see the behavior of their government abroad as the rest of the world sees it. But the victims, millions of them around the world, do see it, and see it in their lives every day, and they know who is ultimately responsible.

**Blowback**

The term "blowback," refers to the unintended consequences of policies that were kept secret from the American people... In a sense, blowback is simply another way of saying that a nation reaps what it sows. Blowback typically appears random and without cause, because the public is unaware of the secret operations that provoked the retaliation. In other words, when the retaliation comes—as it did so spectacularly on September 11, 2001—the American public is unable to put the events in context.

The term "blowback" can help us to re-link certain violent acts against Americans to the policies from which they secretly sprang. These operations have included:

- the clandestine overthrow of governments various administrations did not like;
- the training of foreign militaries in the techniques of state terrorism;
- the rigging of elections in foreign countries;
- interference with the economic viability of countries that seemed to threaten the interests of influential American corporations; and
- the torture or assassination of selected foreigners.

Manuel Noriega, Saddam Hussein, Timothy McVeigh and Osama bin Laden are were all nurtured for many years by the CIA, the U.S. military or military intelligence and tragically serve as reminders of misguided U.S. government activities that ended up as blowback.

From 1945 to the end of the century, the United States attempted to overthrow more than 40 foreign governments, and to crush more than 30 populist-nationalist movements struggling against intolerable regimes.

This is not the way most of us think of U.S. foreign policy. As Chalmers Johnson points out: “We Americans deeply believe that our role in the world is virtuous—that our actions are almost invariably for the good of others as well as ourselves. Even when our actions have led to disaster, we assume that the motives behind them were honorable.” But, Johnson now believes, “the evidence is building up that in the decade following the end of the Cold War, the United States has largely abandoned a reliance on diplomacy, economic aid, international law, and multilateral institutions in carrying out its foreign policies and resorted much of the time to bluster, military force, and financial manipulation.”

**Our Dangerous Swagger**

Tragically, all around the world today, it is possible to see the groundwork being laid for future forms of blowback.
Since World War II, America has undergone a continuous military buildup and currently maintains over 737 bases in other people's countries.

We do not think of these overseas deployments as a form of empire. In fact, most Americans do not give them any thought at all until something truly shocking—such as the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib or Guantánamo Bay—brings them to our attention. But the people living next door to these bases and dealing with the swaggering soldiers who brawl and sometimes rape their women ([see Okinawa details]) certainly think of them as imperial enclaves, just as the peoples of ancient Iberia or nineteenth-century India knew that they were victims of foreign colonization.

Instead of behaving in a professional manner our military (1) invaded Iraq with far too small a force; (2) tolerated an orgy of looting and lawlessness throughout the country; and (3) disobeyed orders and ignored international obligations (see next paragraph). These actions have incessantly fanned the flames of discontent, sowing the seeds for a potential bloody civil war.

**The Battle for Baghdad - Oil for the new Mongols**

A March 25, 2003 press release from the Marines described securing Iraq's oil producing regions as "one of the first objectives of Operation Iraqi Freedom," and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged at press conferences that securing oil wells was a top priority for the military. As the resistance in Baghdad fell; although the Ministry of Oil was protected—callously and seemingly without an ounce of remorse—the National Museum was left to the looters.

There have been many dispiriting sights on TV since the Iraqi war began—the pictures from Abu Ghraib; seeing Fallujah laid waste; American soldiers kicking down the doors of private homes and pointing assault rifles at women and children. But few have reverberated historically like the looting of Baghdad's museum—or been forgotten more quickly in this country. As the evening news documented, the American forces made no effort to prevent the looting of the great cultural institutions of Iraq, its soldiers simply stood by, watching vandals enter and torch the buildings.

The destruction and rampant looting of the Baghdad National Museum (April 11 and 12, 2003) along with the burning (April 14, 2003) of the National Library and Archives as well as the Library of Korans at the Ministry of Religious Endowments were, according to Paul Zimansky, a Boston University archaeologist, "the greatest cultural disaster of the last 500 years." Eleanor Robson of All Souls College, Oxford, said, "You'd have to go back centuries, to the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258, to find looting on this scale."

During the battle for Baghdad, the U.S. military was perfectly willing to dispatch some 2,000 troops to secure northern Iraq's oilfields but the American forces made no effort to prevent the looting of the great cultural institutions of Iraq. Yet Secretary Rumsfeld compared the looting to the aftermath of a soccer game and shrugged it off with the comment that “Stuff happens! Freedom's untidy… Free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.”

At the 6,000-year-old Sumerian city of Ur on a massive stepped temple-tower (built in the period 2112 - 2095 B.C. and restored by Nebuchadnezzar II in the sixth century B.C.), the Marines spray-painted their motto, "Semper Fi" (semper fidelis, always faithful) onto its walls. Shortly thereafter, the military then made the monument "off limits" to everyone in order to disguise the desecration that had occurred there, including the looting by U.S. soldiers of clay bricks used in the construction of the ancient buildings.
Sanitized Euphemisms

Americans may still prefer to use euphemisms like "lone superpower," but since 9/11, our country has undergone a transformation from republic to empire that may well prove irreversible. It suddenly became "un-American" to question the Bush administrations "war on terrorism," let alone a war on Iraq, or on the whole "axis of evil" or even on the sixty or so countries that the president and his secretary of defense announced contained al-Qaeda cells and so were open targets for unilateral American intervention.

Euphemism Glossary

View an interactive list of recent military euphemisms >
(alphabetically ordered)

The media allowed themselves to be manipulated into using sanitized expressions like "collateral damage," "regime change," "illegal combatants," and "preventive war" as if these somehow explained and justified what the Pentagon was doing. At the same time, the government was making strenuous efforts to prevent the new International Criminal Court from ever having the option of considering war crimes charges against American officials.
Resource Protection

Blood and Oil... (based on Michael T Klare's writing - [source >])

America's dependence on imported petroleum has been growing steadily since 1972, when domestic output reached its maximum (or "peak") output. Yet America's total oil consumption remains on an upward course; meaning ever more of the nation's total petroleum supply will have to be imported.

An increasing share of that oil will come from hostile, war-torn countries in the developing world, not from friendly, stable countries such as Canada or Norway. This is the case because the older industrialized countries have already consumed a large share of their oil inheritance, while many producers in the developing world still possess vast reserves of untapped petroleum.

"Control oil and you control nations; control food and you control people." Henry Kissinger, 1970

An historic shift in the center of gravity

We are seeing an historic shift in the center of gravity for world oil production—from the industrialized countries of the global North to the developing nations of the global South, which are often politically unstable, torn by ethnic and religious conflicts, home to extremist organizations, or some combination of all three.

Because oil is viewed as the primary motive for U.S. involvement in these areas, and because the giant U.S. oil corporations are seen as the very embodiment of U.S. power, anything to do with oil—pipelines, wells, refineries, loading platforms—is seen by insurgents as a legitimate and attractive target for attack.

The Middle East

In January 1980—in response to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran—President Jimmy Carter announced that the secure flow of Persian Gulf oil was in "the vital interests of the United States of America", and that in protecting this interest, the United States would use "any means necessary, including military force".

Carter's principle of using force to protect the flow of oil was later cited by President George H W Bush to justify U.S. intervention in the Gulf War of 1990-91, and it has been the underlying strategic rationale for America's invasion and occupation of Iraq ever since. Capt. Kurt Tidd, commander of the Fifth Fleet task force recently told the New York Times, "In the grand scheme of things there may be no other place where our armed forces are deployed that has a greater strategic importance." During an October 2006 press conference, Bush declared that the U.S. could not "tolerate a new terrorist state in the heart of the Middle East with large oil reserves that could be used to fund its radical ambitions or used to inflict economic damage on the West."

Despite the bluster and high-minded rhetoric about planting the seeds of democracy in the Middle East, the underlying motivation for the Iraq war and subsequent occupation has been first and foremost about securing the flow of oil.

In late October 2002, columnist Maureen Dowd of the New York Times would later reveal, Halliburton, the energy services company previously headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, had prepared a confidential 500-page document on how to handle Iraq's oil industry after an invasion and occupation of Iraq. This was, commented Dowd, "a plan [Halliburton] wrote several months before the invasion of Iraq, and before it got a no-bid contract to implement the plan (and overbill the U.S.)."

"I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil."

- Economist Alan Greenspan, chairman of the Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006, when asked why the United States invaded Iraq

Guarding the pipelines

Originally, America’s “protection” policies were largely confined to the world's most important oil-producing region, the Persian Gulf. But given America's ever-growing requirement for imported petroleum, U.S. officials have
begun to extend it to other major producing zones, including the Caspian Sea basin, Africa and Latin America. American sailors are now on oil-protection patrol in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the South China Sea, and along other sea routes that deliver oil to the United States and its allies. In fact, the U.S. military is increasingly being converted into a global oil-protection service.

The energy potential of the Caspian basin has been a hotbed of speculation hope and the construction of a pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan spurred the U.S. to establish military ties with future suppliers, including Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and the pivotal transit state of Georgia.

Typically, such moves are justified as being crucial to the "war on terror". A close reading of Pentagon and State Department documents shows, however, that anti-terrorism and the protection of oil supplies are closely related in administration thinking. When requesting funds in 2004 to establish a "rapid-reaction brigade" in Kazakhstan, for example, the State Department told Congress that such a force is needed to "enhance Kazakhstan's capability to respond to major terrorist threats to oil platforms" in the Caspian Sea.

Another example our involvement in pipeline protection is in Latin America. In Colombia, our government is already spending hundreds of millions of dollars to enhance oil-infrastructure security, beginning with the Cano-Limon pipeline, the sole conduit connecting Occidental Petroleum's prolific fields in Arauca province with the Caribbean coast. As part of this effort, U.S. Army Special Forces personnel from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, are now helping to train, equip, and guide a new contingent of Colombian forces whose sole mission will be to guard the pipeline and fight the guerrillas along its 770km route.

**Patrolling the seas**

An increasing share of U.S. naval forces is also being committed to the protection of foreign oil shipments. The navy's 5th Fleet, based at the island state of Bahrain, now spends much of its time patrolling the vital tanker lanes of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz—the narrow waterway connecting the Gulf to the Arabian Sea and the larger oceans beyond.

The navy has also beefed up its ability to protect vital sea lanes in the South China Sea—the site of promising oilfields claimed by China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia—and in the Strait of Malacca, the critical sea-link between the Persian Gulf and America's allies in East Asia.

Even Africa has come in for increased attention, one officer told Greg Jaffe of the Wall Street Journal in June 2003 that "a key mission for U.S. forces [in Africa] would be to ensure that Nigeria's oilfields, which in the future could account for as much as 25% of all U.S. oil imports, are secure".

Our Future - More Blood for Oil...

The use of U.S. military personnel to help protect vulnerable oil installations in conflict-prone, chronically unstable countries is certain to expand given three critical factors: America's ever-increasing dependence on imported petroleum, a global shift in oil production from the developed to the developing world, and the growing militarization of U.S. foreign energy policy.

This, then, is the future of U.S. military involvement abroad. While anti-terrorism and traditional national-security rhetoric will be employed to explain risky deployments abroad, a growing number of American soldiers and sailors will be committed to the protection of overseas oilfields, pipelines, refineries and tanker routes. And because these facilities are likely to come under increasing attack from guerrillas and terrorists, the risk to American lives will grow accordingly. Inevitably, Americans will pay a higher price in blood for every additional liter of oil they obtain from abroad.
According to an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, released on April 26, 2007, some 78 percent of Americans believe their country to be headed in the wrong direction. Even though large numbers of voters vaguely suspect that the failings of the political system itself led the country into its current crisis, most evidently expect the system to correct itself in due time.

The recent economic downturn and the continual military quagmire we face overseas should be a wake up call. We are on the brink of losing our democracy for the sake of keeping our empire. Once a nation starts down that path, the dynamics that apply to all empires come into play— is isolation, overstretch, the uniting of local and global forces opposed to imperialism, and in the end: bankruptcy.

The combination of
- huge standing armies
- almost continuous wars
- an ever growing economic dependence on the military-industrial complex and the making of weaponry, and 
  ruinous military expenses
- a vast, bloated "defense" budget

...has been destroying our county and the democratic principles that the founders of our country wrote into the Constitution: the separation of powers and the elaborate checks and balances as the main bulwarks against dictatorship and tyranny.

The American political system failed to prevent this combination from developing—and may now be incapable of correcting it.

So the question is what can be done...
- to abolish secret government?
- to bring the CIA and other government-sponsored illegal spying operations and private armies out of the closet of clandestine "unaccountability" and into the scrutinizing light of the public eye?
- to break the hold of the military-industrial complex and to limit or abolish the invisible "black budgets" of our military?

Bushed, Broke and Bankrupt...

Sadly, the present system offers the military high command so much—in funds, prestige, and future employment via the famed "revolving door" of the military-industrial complex—that a thorough re-examination and overhaul of the inherent collusion is desperately needed.

Whatever future developments may prove to be, it is probable that the U.S. will continue to maintain a façade of Constitutional government and drift along until financial bankruptcy overtakes it.

Of course, bankruptcy will not mean the literal end of the U.S. any more than it did for Germany in 1923, China in 1948, or Argentina in 2001-2002. It might, in fact, open the way for an unexpected restoration of the American system—or for military rule, revolution, or simply some new development we cannot yet imagine...

Certainly, such a bankruptcy would mean a drastic lowering of our standard of living, a further loss of control over international affairs, a sudden need to adjust to the rise of other powers, including China and India, and a further discrediting of the notion that the United States is somehow exceptional compared to other nations. We will have to learn what it means to be a far poorer country—and the attitudes and manners that go with it.
From the present vantage point, it certainly seems a daunting challenge for any president (or Congress) from either party even to begin the task of dismantling the military-industrial complex, ending the pall of "national security" secrecy and the "black budgets" that make public oversight of what our government does impossible, and bringing the president's secret army—the CIA, under democratic control.

A New Commitment to Change
("Grass Roots" localism—Inspired by the work of James Howard Kunstler)

Directing our economic interests inward is the necessary first step in stunting the growth of our military-industrial complex. The network of economic and political interests our military has forged in a thousand different ways to American corporations, universities, and economic livelihoods of many of our communities must be shifted to less energy-intensive locally-bred activities.

Our government—although it is the last to admit it—is all too aware of the emerging global energy shortages and unforeseen havoc that will be wrought by climate change. As outlined in this site, most of the overt and covert activities the U.S. government has been engaged in are rooted in "keeping the pipelines flowing." Much of the blowback that resulted stems from our unwelcome presence overseas; guarding, maintaining and controlling these "intercontinental pipelines" (oil wells, refineries, shipping lanes, etc.).

Readjusting our economy and energy "dependencies" to a more regional or even local level will allow us to become more self-reliant and conserve energy. We are faced with the necessity to downscale, re-scale, right-size, and reorganize all the fundamental activities of daily life including the size, shape, and scale of our towns and cities. Buying locally grown food and shopping at "Mom and Pop" stores in the neighborhood are evolutionary activities that will help wean us away from national big box retailers dependent on cheap overseas labor and the energy-guzzling twelve-thousand-mile merchandise supply chain required.

Rebuilding the railroad system and mandating increased fuel efficiency standards in our automobiles would be logical first step in realistically facing an energy-scarce future. Reviving manufacturing in our "homeland" would also lessen our tragic reliance on foreign trade and gradually whittle down the power of multinational corporations.

As economic and political power devolves to the local and regional level, the state and federal governments with their enormous bureaucracies will be increasingly scrutinized and black budgets and overseas shenanigans would/should inevitably be reduced if not curtailed.

Final Thoughts...
We will have to do what circumstances require of us. As Americans, we live in a beautiful country with vibrant towns and cities, and a gorgeous, productive rural landscape. There are no magic remedies for what we face, but there are intelligent responses that we can marshal individually and collectively. Our founding fathers had a vision. For our collective future, we must see and act with equal clarity and resolve.