

Now I Understand Why They Hate Us

How a middle-class white guy came to accept the evil embedded in American political and military might

This is an essay on my coming to understand the depth of US militarism. It has taken me a lifetime to understand that we are a deeply militaristic society, and our self perception as a beneficent, peace-loving country hides an uglier reality. It first appeared on AlterNet (www.alternet.org)

Shortly after the attacks of 9/11, many American voices raised the question, “Why do they hate us?” The “they” in this case was Muslim fundamentalists, but the same question could have been asked of South American peasants, of the people of Iraq or Iran, of the poor of India or Indonesia, or, indeed, of the poor anywhere.

In fact, they don't *only* hate us; the feelings of people around the world toward the United States are a complex mixture of positive and negative.

On the one hand, for instance, much of the rest of the world is excited by the election of Barack Obama. Almost six years ago, visiting Iraq just before the American invasion, I listened to Iraqis who professed their admiration for much of America and how American democracy has been a “beacon” to the rest of the world. On the other hand, those same Iraqis felt betrayed by the United States that would attack a country that did not threaten it. And by 2008 multiple polls of people around the world revealed a deep anger toward our country: Clear majorities believe us to be the “greatest danger to world peace.” My own coming to understand why they hate us has been a painful process but one I consider important to share with any American who still does not understand.

My Own Conditioning: The City upon a Hill

I grew up in the 1950s. Americans were still celebrating our critical role in defeating Germany and Japan and, we thought, protecting the world from fascism. Our economy was as big as the combined economies of the rest of the world put together, and we had used some of that economic power through the Marshall Plan to successfully rebuild the economies of war-shattered Europe. We were the rising empire, and we saw ourselves as the world's savior.

It seemed to us (middle-class whites) a time of prosperity and suburbanization, an era of magnanimity and cooperation, a period of confidence that our national path would be continuously upward. I remember predictions that our increasing economic productivity would enable us to halve the work week within a generation while still raising our standard of living.

As a society, however, we generally chose not to see the more ominous realities. Few of us reflected upon the wanton destruction of innocent life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The CIA-instigated overthrow of democratically elected leaders in Iran, Guatemala, and elsewhere and, a little later, the assassination attempts on Fidel Castro were only outlandish rumors (that only “the paranoid” believed). The white majority could still ignore segregation. I did not find out about the bizarre, anti-communist antics of Senator Joe McCarthy until I was in college a decade later.

Little of our dark side entered my consciousness in the 1950s and early 1960s. Rather, I grew up with the unarticulated sense that our nation was nearing the perfect society; we were “almost there,” not so distant from the Kingdom of God. In Puritan Christian terminology we were the “city upon a hill,” “the light of the world” that should not be hidden. God had blessed us; we saw ourselves as exceptional people ... and exceptionally righteous. In 1963 I hitchhiked from London through Europe to Finland to visit my future wife, and I do not remember feeling surprised that the American flag on my luggage made it easier to get rides. Of course foreigners loved Americans; who wouldn’t?

Paradoxically, even the moral and political disaster of the Vietnam War reinforced my sense that America would continue to move toward its ideal. I came of age during the war and joined in active opposition to it, ultimately refusing induction into the Army. While still in college, I became a speaker for the War Resisters League, touring campuses and lecturing against the war. I learned about some of the disturbing realities of American imperialism in Southeast Asia, of course, but—again without articulating it to myself—I judged it a momentary anomaly of, rather than a continuation of, our history. Not until much later did I make the connections between the killing of two to three million Vietnamese (the vast majority innocent civilians) with the genocide of Native Americans or the enslavement of African Americans or the deaths of the half million Filipino civilians who died following our 1898 attempt to control their country. Rather, I interpreted the strength of our anti-war protests to block the re-election of President Johnson and ultimately force withdrawal from Vietnam as manifestation of the power and hope of American democracy. Despite the fact that a few years later during my second trip to Europe I was better off hitchhiking *without* the American flag, the Vietnam War and our resistance to it strengthened my faith in our country, its democracy, and its inherent goodness.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, I was immersed in medical school and doctoring in a small town in northern Minnesota. The war in Vietnam was over, I was not paying much attention to foreign affairs, and I was completely unaware of American interventions in Central and South America (such as the CIA participation in the overthrow of the democratically elected Allende government in Chile). From my point of view, American society seemed to work pretty well. We were still the city upon a hill.

Inner-City Injustice

In 1983 I moved to Washington DC to practice medicine in a small clinic in an economically devastated African-American ghetto. The injustice of inner-city Washington appalled me. The public perception—then as now—was that the *behavior* of the poor was primarily responsible for their poverty, but as I worked in the midst of that devastation, it soon became obvious that the racism and injustice of our society were the primary causes of the poverty, indeed, the primary causes of even the behavior of the impoverished (for instance, poor education or single-parenthood) that society held responsible for the poverty. Still confident in the goodness of our society, however, I naïvely assumed that correcting the misperception required only educating affluent Americans about the real conditions oppressing the poor, so I began lecturing and writing. I discovered, however, that most affluent people were too comfortable to confront truths challenging their beliefs that they had earned their comfort or that the poor were themselves responsible for not earning theirs. I was beginning to understand that we were not the light to the world I had imagined.

The juxtaposition of the personal generosity of many Americans with their unwillingness to recognize the injustice that made their affluence possible was striking. Most people I knew would reach out to an individual poor person in their community with help, but they were unwilling even to acknowledge the structures that caused the poverty in the first place. Why did moral people not recognize the immorality of their society? I recognize the truth of Brazilian archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara's statement, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." It was not enough to keep oneself morally upright and charitable; one had also to confront the structures that elevated some and oppressed other.

During my first years in Washington in the 1980s, I belonged to a faith community that was actively involved in protesting the US role in Central America. Although I was personally more involved in the injustice in the inner city, the direct participation of trusted friends in Central America offered me a very different view of our government's actions in Central America than was available in the mainstream media. The United States was actively involved in supporting

military dictatorships in Guatemala and El Salvador, providing military aid and equipment to these and other repressive governments, and training their military and police officers in brutal tactics, all of which led to the massacres of hundreds of thousands of people. The Reagan administration defied Congressional restrictions and funded right-wing attacks on the democratically elected Nicaraguan Sandinista government; it also mined harbors in Nicaragua, an action later denounced by the International Court of Justice. Yet there was very little coverage of any of this in our mainstream media. I watched our government simply stonewall what it was doing, lying to the American people.

I began to sense the connections between the poverty I was experiencing in the inner city of Washington and the devastation caused by American military force around the world. The inner city had itself been militarized with regular use of commando-like SWAT teams and the criminalization of large percentages of the population, especially through the “War on Drugs” that made criminals of addicts but also through welfare regulations that made criminals of poor families. Both inner-city and foreign devastation were caused by structures that ultimately worked to benefit affluent Americans; both had causes that the American people were not only mostly unaware of but also unwilling to recognize. In neither case did our mainstream media ever give us a clear picture of what was going on, although the truth was in plain sight.

The Iraq Sanctions

But it was the personal confrontation with the economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Iraq that broke through my own reluctance and brought me face-to-face with the evil embedded in American political and military might.

In December 2002, shortly before the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq, I visited the country for three weeks out of a desire as an American to be in solidarity with a people soon to be attacked by my government. I had no particular agenda ahead of time, but I quickly learned about the United Nations economic sanctions that had been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children in the preceding ten years. I also discovered that although these sanctions were officially imposed by the United Nations, they had been sustained entirely at the insistence of the United States. How could my country be responsible for the deaths of so many children?

In August of 1990, after a decade of tacit (and sometimes very active) support by the United States, Saddam Hussein invaded neighboring Kuwait, an action that was universally

condemned around the world. In response, under the leadership of the United States government, the United Nations Security Council authorized severe economic sanctions upon Iraq (UN Resolution 661) in an effort to force Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait. These were perhaps the most stringent sanctions ever imposed upon a modern nation, so severe that they could only humanely be used as *short-term* overwhelming pressure to compel withdrawal from Kuwait. It was widely appreciated by experts—even within our own government—that any long-term application of this level of economic sanctions would cause lethal civilian consequences, especially for children.

Despite the sanctions, the Iraqi army continued its occupation of Kuwait, so in January of 1991, the United States led a coalition of nations in a military attack on Iraqi occupation troops in Kuwait, forcing a hasty retreat. While the military power of the United States and its allies easily overpowered Iraqi forces, the coalition decided for political reasons only to repel the Iraq invasion of Kuwait and attack Iraq by air but not to invade Iraq with ground troops or use military force to remove Saddam completely from power. But during the six-week air war, the Iraqi military had been decimated including the complete destruction of the air force. The civilian infrastructure of Iraq—including electrical generation, sanitation, and water purification—had been profoundly damaged.

The Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait fulfilled the stated objective of the UN economic sanctions. Nevertheless, the United States government insisted upon continuing the stringent economic sanctions upon Iraq. The intent was to force the people of Iraq to remove Saddam from power, even though it is illegal under international law to punish a population in order to provoke it to overthrow the government. Unfortunately, the original UN resolution did not provide for automatic withdrawal of the sanctions upon Saddam's compliance with its requirements to remove his forces from Kuwait; rather, the resolution's language required the passage of a new UN Security Council resolution to relax or abolish the sanctions. According to Security Council rules, however, any of the five permanent members of the Security Council can veto any new resolution. Over the next twelve years the United States—sometimes joined by Great Britain—made it clear its objection to any lifting of the sanctions and vetoed periodic attempts by other nations to end them. In other words, although these were technically United Nations sanctions, they continued *only* because of United States insistence.

Given the previous devastation of Iraqi infrastructure, however, the severity of these sanctions was so extreme that the catastrophic effect on the civilian population (including the deaths of countless civilians) was predictable and inevitable. Indeed, documents obtained later reveal that senior officials within the United States government were well aware of the impact that the sanctions would have upon civilians. Specifically banned by the sanctions, for instance, were replacement parts required to repair the damaged electrical power plants, sanitation infrastructure, and water purification facilities throughout the country. Millions of Iraqis would be

drinking contaminated water. The United States maintained these highly lethal sanctions for twelve years until May 2003, two months after the beginning of the war in Iraq.

While the exact number of casualties is unknown, the United Nations estimated that half a million Iraqi children died between 1991 and 1998 alone because of the sanctions, most from malnutrition and waterborne disease. Before the 1991 war and the economic sanctions, Iraq had been one of the most advanced countries in the Middle East with low childhood mortality, high levels of education, and relative freedom for women. [\[1\]](#) Although the 1995 UN Oil-for-Food Program allowed Iraq to sell some of its oil for food and certain medications, the sanctions remained brutal, preventing repair of the electrical grid or sanitation systems.

[\[2\]](#)

As a result hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, especially children, died; hundreds of thousands more were permanently affected by malnutrition and disease.

As I visited families in late 2002 Iraq, it was not unusual to walk along city ditches filled with sewage ... in a country that fifteen years earlier had been the most modern in the Middle East. I talked with workers at a water treatment plant. Even when they could jerry-rig repairs to the machinery, the intermittent electricity (usually off at least half the day due to the continuing damage to the electrical grid) meant that for those hours there was no pressure in the water pipes—that paralleled or went right through those sewage ditches—thus allowing bacteria from the sewage to seep into the pipes until the power went back on, carrying the now-contaminated water to families for drinking.

I also discovered that since 1991 United States air power had patrolled the skies to enforce “no-fly zones” in north and south Iraq, frequently attacking what they believed were military installations, often killing civilians.

What was my country doing? How could the reliance on lethal force become such an accepted part of American life that not even the intentional murder of upwards of 500,000 children raised any eyebrows? How was this possible?

I returned to the United States in January of 2003 as our government was preparing to invade Iraq to realize that few Americans were paying attention to the devastation we had perpetrated in Iraq for the previous twelve years (just as I had not previously paid attention). When I talked with my liberal acquaintances, they were so focused on the Bush administration’s aggression that few were willing to consider the bipartisan approval of these sanctions, which were initiated

during the first Bush administration, continued during the Clinton administration, and would only be lifted after we had toppled Saddam's government. Few Americans seemed to care, and the few reports of their deadly effects on Iraqi children were buried in the media and inspired little passion.

But Osama bin Laden and many of the world's Muslims cared and were impassioned. On October 7, 2001, a few weeks after he unleashed the deadly attacks of 9/11, bin Laden released a video in which he offered three reasons for his enmity toward the United States; one of them was the Iraq sanctions. "One million Iraqi children have thus far died although they did not do anything wrong," bin Laden said into the camera. Certainly everyone I talked with in Iraq in December 2002 knew why their children were dying; they knew who had blasted their country back into third-world poverty. They knew who was responsible.

A Sense of the Beneficent Amidst Pervasive Militarism

I believe that my country has become something different—almost opposite to—the country most Americans believe we live in. We see ourselves as benign. We see ourselves as the light of the world. We interpret our actions—whether military adventures, economic initiatives, or cultural exports—as good and as welcomed by the rest of the world. (Still in 2005 a majority of Americans believed that most people in the world supported the invasion of Iraq!) We see ourselves as the (perhaps somewhat tarnished) white knight. In other words we are holding on to a vision that might have had some truth in it right after World War II but that no longer holds true. We see ourselves as a great hope for the rest of the world; others see us as "the greatest danger to world peace."

Although it now shocks me how long it has taken me, how much evidence I previously hid from, only recently have I become conscious of the pervasiveness of American militarism, how it defines who we are and how we are perceived. What do I mean by "militarism"? I mean a general belief within a country that an overpowering military is necessary for national security and a general willingness to spend virtually unlimited funds for that purpose. Militarism means a national conviction that the country must be prepared to use its military power aggressively to maintain its interests. In practical terms it means that the nation is prepared to turn very quickly toward military solutions to international problems without allowing other measures a real chance to work. The threat of military response becomes ever-present in international conflict and so becomes, at least as far as other countries are concerned, our *first* response to conflict.

Consider a few examples over the last years: It is militarism that breaks off reasonably successful diplomatic negotiations [\[3\]](#) with North Korea, labeling the country among the “axis of evil,” and making take-it-or-leave-it demands not so subtly backed up by our military. It is militarism when the nation refuses to consider internationally coordinated police and intelligence action as a response to al Qaeda’s attack on 9/11 but instead insists on invading Afghanistan. It is militarism to refuse to allow the United Nations inspections team to finish its work in Iraq (no weapons of mass destruction had been found) in order to invade in 2003. It is militarism that rebuffs a direct high-level appeal to the Bush administration from Iran (in 2003) to enter into negotiations (in which Iran had suggested trading its nuclear aspirations for a guaranteed non-aggression pact), instead labeling Iran among the “axis of evil” and then leaking repeated threats to invade or bomb military targets.

Since 1941, the United States has been continuously engaged in, or mobilized for, war. That that fact does not seriously disturb or even surprise most of us is a powerful sign of how inured we have become to our nation’s militarization. After conflicts prior to World War II, the United States disbanded or sharply reduced its combat forces and military budget when the fighting was over. But instead of reigning in our military after World War II, we entered immediately into the Cold War. Even after the demise of the Soviet Union when there was literally no military threat, our military spending barely hiccupped as we continued our mobilization for war. In addition to the massive expenditures in the Cold War, between the end of World War II and 9/11, the United States conducted approximately 200 overseas military operations in which our forces attacked first. In no case did a democratic government come about as a direct result, although we installed and protected numerous dictators, including the Shah of Iran, General Suharto in Indonesia, Batista in Cuba, Somoza in Nicaragua, Pinochet in Chile, and Mobutu in Congo/Zaire, not to mention the series of American-backed militarists in South Vietnam and Cambodia. For decades we also ran what-can-only-be-called terrorist operations against Cuba and, for a shorter time, in Nicaragua. [\[4\]](#)

As he was leaving office, President Eisenhower famously warned us against the military-industrial complex, in which the extraordinary power of the economic interests that profit from war push us in that direction. But Eisenhower he was not the only president to warn us against war. James Madison, the chief author of the Constitution and later president wrote, “Of all the enemies of true liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it [contains the seed] of every other. ... No nation can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.” [\[5\]](#)

George Washington cautioned against a standing army for similar reasons.

Evidence of our extraordinary militarism is everywhere. Although the exact number is unknown, the United States has at least 731 (according to Pentagon statistics)—but more probably close to 1,000—foreign military bases scattered around the world in over 130 different

countries. Although many of those bases are small, each nevertheless represents American military presence in another country. Why are they there except to project military power and threat? If one is trying to understand the anger in the rest of the world toward the United States, one place to start is imagining, say, German military bases in your community surrounded by the usual bars and brothels. Young GIs who speak no English nor know American customs speed drunkenly through your community on their time off and there is the too frequent assault or rape of young women, most of which go unprosecuted. Then imagine that your community is socially and religiously very conservative and that the base has been there for decades.

In September 2002 the Bush administration published an updated United States National Security Strategy that, for the first time, elaborated the doctrine of “preventive war.” According to this policy, the United States will not wait until threats against us are “fully formed” but will act militarily to prevent them from developing. In other words, if the president perceives a growing threat to US national interests, our military will force its removal. This unilateral doctrine directly flouts centuries of international law which forbid attacks upon a country unless that country has already attacked or attack is “imminent” (such as when an enemy’s troops are massed on one’s borders). This newly formulated and clearly illegal doctrine justified our invasion of Iraq, much as Japan used its doctrine of preventive war to justify the attack on Pearl Harbor when it wanted to prevent what its leaders perceived to be the US military threat in the Pacific from becoming fully formed.

Cost

One measure of our extraordinary militarism is the amount of money we spend arming ourselves. Total military expenditures constitute almost \$1.5 trillion per year or 54% of federal discretionary spending. [\[6\]](#) No other country spends anything remotely similar to this; in fact, the United States spends more than the next highest sixteen countries combined. US military spending is currently 47% of the world’s total.

Militarization in our country has become self-sustaining and now drives our foreign and domestic policies rather than the other way around. The economic interests alone of those who benefit from military spending are staggering. Military contractors have dispersed their operations throughout the country so that virtually every congressperson has military spending in his or her district. In fact, lobbyists do not have to argue the *utility* of continued spending but only point to the economic importance to the Congresspersons district. This is how projects that the Pentagon does not even particularly want end up in the budget. This is the “military-industrial complex” that President Eisenhower so strongly warned against. The political power of the recipients of military spending is overwhelming.

As a writer I struggle to find the words to express my shock, anger, and shame at discovering that my country has been among “the bad guys,” responsible for the deaths of millions of innocents in the last half century, and in the view of most of the worlds citizens (according to numerous polls of people in other countries) “the greatest threat to world peace.” It seems, I suppose, a bit dramatic—an expression of the hyper-partisan posturing that has characterized politics for the last fifteen years—to “express shock, anger and shame” at something that has been going on my entire life right under my nose. But, like the legendary frog that does not notice the water temperature rising in the pot until it is too late, I have been aware of many of the particulars but have not until recently pulled them together in a coherent picture that so massively condemns what we have become.

We Americans have allowed our assumptions that we’re the good guys—that we’re acting in the best interests of justice, peace and democracy—to blind us to the reality of the death and destruction we are responsible for. Even several years after the American invasion of Iraq when it had become clear that there had been no weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam had never been a threat to us, close, well-meaning friends kept assuring me that “President Bush knows something that he can’t tell us.” And now that it is clear that the president had no secret information, many are blaming him for the disaster. But Iraq is atypical only in that the thin-to-non-existent rationale for invasion has been so clearly exposed. But Iraq is no different in kind from dozens of other military and covert actions that we have unilaterally and illegally taken in the last fifty years—from Vietnam to Nicaragua to Panama to Grenada.

Yes, of course, many of us have been shocked by the foreign policy excesses of the Bush administration—preventive war, torture, extraordinary rendition, foreign policy unilateralism, and so on—but these are more the extensions of previous American immorality than new directions. This is my country, but I am ashamed that we allow militarism to so dominate it and ashamed that it has taken me so long to see it clearly.

Arrogation of Power and Subversion of the Constitution

One of the major threats to democracy from this state of permanent war is the inevitable transfer of power from Congress and the judiciary to the president as commander-in-chief. With the entire military under his command, with the intelligence services under his control, with the political power of the military contractors backing him, the president has in wartime extraordinary power, even if it is only his own fiat that has created “wartime.” Ongoing war profoundly endangers the checks and balances of our constitutional system.

It is not only the Bush administration; this subversion of the Constitution has happened during most wartimes. President Lincoln illegally suspended *habeas corpus* during the Civil War. President Roosevelt interned Japanese Americans during World War II. Under President Eisenhower the CIA orchestrated the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Iran to install the Shah. President Johnson engineered the Gulf of Tonkin incident to force Congress to authorize the war in Vietnam. President Reagan authorized the illegal contra war against the government of Nicaragua, even after Congress had expressly prohibited him from doing so. True, the presidential arrogation of power has accelerated under our current president, but it is also a continuation of a long and dangerous trend. (It has also been the trend in many other historical empires ... just before they collapsed.)

President Bush has declared a “War on Terror.” Since the Constitution allows only Congress to declare war, the War on Terror is not a constitutionally legal war, yet the president continues to claim extraordinary powers as commander-in-chief in “wartime.” But how does one know when the War on Terror is over? When there are literally no more terrorists? A president who can define war however he chooses and remain at war as long as he chooses has indefinite dictatorial powers. The militarization of our nation puts us into a state of perpetual war (declared or undeclared), which creates a perpetual transfer of power to the president that makes a mockery of the constitutional balance of powers between the president, Congress, and the courts.

When President Bush several years ago signed the law (that he had originally opposed) prohibiting torture by US forces, he created a “signing statement” indicating that he would only follow the law only if it did not conflict with his understanding of his duties as commander-in-chief. In other words, he was not bound by the portions of the law he did not like; he was above the law. In reality, signing statements have no standing under the law and are most likely unconstitutional. [\[7\]](#) All recent presidents have *occasionally* used signing statements but primarily to clarify for the executive branch of government under him how the law should be interpreted. But under President Bush not only have signing statements become routine, they have also been used specifically to nullify parts of the law, further arrogating power to the president. If their use is allowed to stand, they move us significantly toward presidential dictatorial powers.

Citing his authority as commander-in-chief, President Bush several years ago authorized the National Security Administration to wiretap Americans without a warrant from the secret court established under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). In the history of that FISA court, there had been over 18,000 previous government requests for surveillance warrants; only four had ever been rejected, so it is difficult to understand why the president believed it

necessary to break the law unless he thought that even the compliant court would not tolerate the kind of surveillance planned.

Chalmers Johnson writes that the inevitable result of our failure to reign in military spending once the Cold War was underway (and then even after it was over)

was a continual transfer of powers to the presidency exactly as Madison had predicted, the use of executive secrecy to freeze out Congress and the judiciary, the loss of congressional mastery over the budget, and the rise of two new, extraconstitutional centers of power that are today out of control—the Department of Defense and the fifteen intelligence organizations, the best known of which is the Central Intelligence Agency. [\[8\]](#)

The Bush administration is the most secretive in US history. The 1979 Freedom of Information Act requires all federal departments to provide non-classified documents to any who request it. But Attorney General John Ashcroft sent out explicit, detailed instructions to all government departments on how to foil the law. The Presidential Records Act was passed after the Watergate conspiracy to keep all presidential papers under public administration once the president left office, so scholars could eventually determine what actually went on. But President Bush signed an executive order contravening the explicit provisions of the act. The courts have not yet ruled on the constitutionality of his order, but that he believed he needed it is significant.

Our democracy is in danger. Congress has chosen not to challenge the arrogation of presidential power and the Supreme Court has come perilously close to declaring constitutional the “unitary executive theory” (under which this power as commander-in-chief has flowed to the president). Despite clear Supreme Court precedent to the contrary, the present Court appears now to be one vote away from giving the president the power he demands.

Unfortunately, the danger is not just one man or one administration that will be swept from office on January 20th. No modern president has ever turned down the power given to him. As he has discovered the power of the intelligence agencies under his control, for instance, every modern president has used it. The power of the presidency has grown without interruption since the Great Depression. Unless something is done, the next president—or the one after that—will maintain these powers and pass them on. Our democracy is in peril.

Public Acceptance of Brutality

The militarization of our nation has had other profound effects. One has been the increasing public acceptance of brutality on the part of the government. Immediately following 9/11, over a thousand foreigners were rounded up. All

details of their cases were kept secret, including their names and the charges, if any, against them. ... They were simply seized, incarcerated mostly in New York prisons, beaten by guards, and, after a lengthy time in jail, deported, usually for the most minor of offenses. ... Not one of those arrested turned out to have the slightest connection to the 9/11 attacks.” [\[9\]](#)

There was no legal basis for any of this. There was also virtually no indignation expressed by the people of this country. *Habeas corpus*, the right to be brought before a judge to hear the charges against one to prevent baseless detention, one of the fundamental rights of democracy extending back centuries had been trampled and very few objected.

Over the past several years as it has become clear that the Bush administration has not only condoned but also encouraged torture from the highest levels (their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding), there *has* been some objection from both the right and the left. But there has been no general outrage, no mass demonstrations in the street, no general calls for impeachment. According to polls in May of 2004, over 50% of Americans believed that the government was employing torture “as a matter of policy,” [\[10\]](#) yet President Bush was re-elected later in that same year.

The United States has signed the Geneva Conventions, which means, according to our Constitution, that their provisions have the force of US law. The Conventions prohibit any kind of violence to civilians. During the “shock and awe” phase of the Iraq war, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his aides planned to try to kill “high value targets” like Saddam Hussein. “According to the plans, Rumsfeld personally had to sign off on any airstrike thought likely to result in the deaths of more than thirty civilians. The air war commander ... proposed fifty such raids and Rumsfeld signed the orders for each and every one.” [\[11\]](#) We have become so used to the euphemism “collateral damage” that many are surprised to learn that the term is not recognized or even mentioned in international humanitarian law. Even without the Geneva Conventions, any interpretation of the just war theory prohibits violence against noncombatants.

We have apparently become used to our governments acting in immoral, illegal and brutal ways. We apparently find it acceptable.

It's Not as Effective as We Think

An inevitable aspect of militarism is the general tendency to see military force as far more effective than it actually is and to accept it as the first response to conflict. According to first-hand accounts, after 9/11 the administration gave *no* consideration to a nonmilitary response. The assumption was that only military invasion could capture bin Laden and put an end to al Qaeda's terrorism. Did anyone think that the powerful US military would not be able to capture this one man? It is telling that very few Americans dissented from the decision to invade Afghanistan—despite the illegality of the invasion and its inevitable, predictable violence toward civilians. Only one member of Congress, California's Barbara Lee, voted against it.

But what if—as many of us suggested—we hadn't glorified bin Laden by declaring war on him and his organization? What if we had declared bin Laden and his accomplices *criminals* and used intelligence and policing methods to bring him to justice. We had the sympathy and proffered cooperation of virtually every nation in the world. (Even the Taliban government offered to hand bin Laden over to a neutral country if we provided proof of his guilt; the US government, clearly intent on war, rejected this offer without seriously considering it.) What if we had considered the invasion of Afghanistan the last possible alternative and we had seriously negotiated with the Taliban to hand bin Laden over or allow an international police force to find him? What if we had offered substantial foreign aid to Afghanistan to encourage the citizenry to see the United States positively (we had helped rid Afghanistan of the Soviets in the 1980s) and help us find bin Laden? I obviously do not know what would have happened if we had followed that path, but could it possibly have been worse than what we did, which has clearly increased the number of Islamic fundamentalists willing to wage *jihad* against the United States? Militarism is not even considering another possibility besides military force.

The Iraq war is another obvious example. It's not surprising that the military power paid for by half the world's budget could easily sweep away the military power of a third-rate power already decimated by a previous war and twelve years of overwhelming economic sanctions. (In fact, Saddam's military hardly resisted; rather, the fighters took their weapons, retreated, and waited.) Military power is highly destructive. But how effective has US military might been in

overcoming the insurgency or bringing about democracy?

Indeed, in the last sixty years foreign military force has provided no match for indigenous, insurgent forces anywhere, whether the French in Algeria, the French or the Americans in Vietnam, the “coalition forces” in Iraq, or NATO in Afghanistan. Military force in those cases is not just costly, bloody, and violence provoking; it is stupid and ineffective.

Alternatives to Militarism

Unfortunately, there is almost complete agreement among American political leaders that we need more rather than less military power and military spending. Even President-elect Obama is part of the post-World-War-II, bipartisan consensus that views unchallengeable military strength as essential. In his campaign, at least, he called for *increased* spending on the military. Although he has called for withdrawal from Iraq, he has also called for moving those troops to Afghanistan, a move that will be as futile as the Soviet attempt to tame Afghanistan in the 1980s unless the endeavor becomes something very different from a *military* campaign.

What are the alternatives? First, and most importantly, the United States military must become what most Americans believe it should be—a defensive force that protects the United States from attack. The nearly one thousand military bases around the world need to be dismantled and its personnel brought home. Our country must strongly repudiate the preventive war doctrine of the 2002 National Security Strategy, give up our self-proclaimed role as the globe’s policeman and follow European nations’ examples of having a purely defensive military.

Second, we must take the lead in world nuclear disarmament. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia and the other former Soviet states were eager for the abolishment of nuclear weapons, but the United States government refused to consider disarmament. Instead, we have refused to honor our commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, refused to enter into the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The recent tensions between India and Pakistan (while highlighting the hesitation of nuclear powers to engage in open warfare) and the possibility that the political instability of Pakistan would leave nuclear weapons in the hands of Islamic fundamentalists underscore the necessity to abolish these weapons from the face of the Earth. Over the last twenty years, the militarism of the United States has been the greatest barrier to their abolition. We must take the lead in

destroying them and leading other nations to do the same. [\[12\]](#)

Third, we must strengthen capacity for international police action. For some time to come, international armed force against terrorist and other dangerous groups will be necessary, but this force must be deployed as police action not as war. (Military attacks always kill and wound civilians and damage civilian infrastructure leading inevitably to the creation of new antagonisms and through them to the recruiting of new terrorists.) The world's current ability to provide such police force has been hampered by the US insistence on being the sole world policeman. Intelligence services and cooperation with other nations to arrest terrorists as "criminals" (rather than the "freedom fighters" they become in military conflict) is the model used by other Western nations and would be far more productive (and far less expensive) than our current military model. Our country needs to encourage the strengthening of the United Nations or other such international organization that could provide military force when needed in failed states or situations of gross human rights abuses.

Finally, we must use the hundreds of billions of dollars saved from disarmament to provide foreign aid to underdeveloped countries. The growth of terrorism and the failure of states stems directly from poverty and ignorance. Providing enough food, shelter, basic education, and adequate health care for everyone in the world is, relatively speaking, not an expensive endeavor, certainly less than we've been spending in Iraq. Only the development of the third world will give us the potential for freedom from terror.

The previous discussion of the financial cost of our militarization offers one clear avenue for reversing the current political consensus in favor of militarism. As Kevin Phillips outlines in his *Wealth and Democracy*,

[\[13\]](#)

a primary cause of the decline of the last three Western empires (Spain, Holland and Great Britain) has been bankruptcy through militarization. As each of these empires has become wealthy and powerful, it has attempted to maintain its world position through military spending, each time imagining that its wealth and power were limitless. In each case, the vast military expenditures crippled the empire, leading directly to its decline. It should be obvious that the United States is well into this process of damaging itself with its own military expenditures. With a ten trillion dollar debt (much of it to countries who could easily use it against us) and an annual deficit that has been running close to \$500 billion, the time is ripe to push for a maximum reduction in military spending (that could reduce the average deficit to zero)

[\[14\]](#)

. While our nation does not have moral right to forego those aspects of the military budget that pay for

past

wars (primarily veterans' benefits), transforming our military from an offensive weapon into an

institution for national defense would be an affirmation of American principles stated in our founding documents while saving our country from the historical course of all empires that turn toward militarism.

President-elect Obama has promised that he will respond to the concerns of the citizenry. While he has indicated the willingness to change course in Iraq and to renounce torture and extraordinary rendition, he has so far demonstrated no consciousness of the danger of militarism or of the threat of the presidential arrogation of power. Now is the time to educate ourselves about our country's extraordinary militarism and begin the political push to change our national direction. American militarism is a dead end; it is time we woke up, smelled the coffee, and created the change we can believe in.

[1] This is not to defend the government of Saddam Hussein, which was dictatorial and brutal and hated by many Iraqis; it is only to say that Saddam has used some of Iraq's oil wealth to raise the general standard of living well above its neighbors in the Middle East.

[2] The US prohibited "dual-use" items and claimed that the parts needed to repair the electrical grid or the sanitation system "could" be used to produce military weapons, much as auto tires "could" be used for military vehicles or virtually anything "could" be used to assist in a war effort.

[3] Under the Clinton administration

[4] Johnson, Chalmers, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2006, pp 18-19.

[5] Ibid, p 18

[6] These figures from the War Resisters League (<http://www.warresisters.org/pages/piech>

[art.htm](#)

) are admittedly controversial.

The Pentagon, for instance, reports receiving “only” 20% of the total US budget. But Pentagon figures do not include the military portion of the spending in other departments (eg Department of Energy expenditures on nuclear weapons), any costs from past wars (eg, health care for wounded veterans), interest on debt outstanding from past wars, or “special allocations” for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Pentagons 20% figure also includes in its denominator of total government spending Social Security and Medicare, which are dedicated trust funds, not part of the discretionary budget. With these included in the denominator, obviously the Pentagons percentage shrinks.

[7] Although the constitutionality of signing statements has not yet been challenged in high courts, the Supreme Court has ruled that “line-item vetoes” (in which the president nullifies one or another provisions of a law) are unconstitutional. The president must either sign a bill or veto it and send it back to Congress; he cannot reject only certain provisions from the law. Since this is precisely what most signing statements do, it is highly unlikely that the presidential signing statements have any legal authority.

[8] Ibid, pp 20-21

[9] Ibid p 249

[10] ABC News: http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/polls/torture_poll_040527.html

[11] Ibid p 32-33

[12] As Jonathan Schell points out in *The Unconquerable World*, just the *capacity* to make nuclear weapons in two nations renders war between them unthinkable. It is true that while we can make nuclear weapons illegal, we can't destroy the knowledge of how to produce them. A number of developed, currently non-nuclear nations could without much difficulty put together nuclear weapons if they chose to. But just that capacity provides the teeth for any treaty abolishing nuclear weapons: Nuclear weapons manufacture is easy to detect by weapons inspection, so any nation trying to cheat on the treaty would be discovered and other nations could arm themselves quickly. This would provide a strong disincentive to cheat on such a treaty.

[13] Phillips, Kevin, *Wealth and Democracy*, Broadway Books, New York, 2002, Chapter 4, pp 171-200.

[14] The current need for deficit spending to get us out of the economic collapse that will undoubtedly yield a government deficit on well over a trillion dollars a year for the next year or two is a special case. Even here, however, reducing the military budget would allow us to spend that money on infrastructure, health care and education, all of which have a much more powerful stimulative effect than military spending.