

An ailing, flailing, failing empire lashes out

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OPINION

As a retired US Air Force officer, I firmly believe in civilian control of our military. This country should be a nation of laws — not of special interests, oligarchs, or kings. Before committing our forces to battle, Congress should always declare war in the name of the people. Our military should indeed be a citizen-soldier force, not an isolated caste driven by a warrior ethos. And above all, the United States should be a republic ruled by law and shaped by sound moral values, not a greed-driven empire fueled by militarism.

Yet when I express such views, I feel like I'm clinging to a belief in the tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus. It feels idealistic, naive, even painful to think that way. Yes, I served this country in uniform for 20 years, and now, in the age of Donald Trump, it has, as far as I can tell, thoroughly lost its way. The unraveling began so long ago — most obviously with the disastrous Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s, though in truth, this country's imperial desires predated even the Spanish-American War of 1898, stretching back to the wanton suppression of indigenous peoples as part of its founding and expansion.

A glance at US history reveals major atrocities: the displacement and murder of Native Americans, slavery, and all too many imperial misadventures abroad. I knew of such realities when I joined the military in 1985, near the end of the Cold War. Despite its flaws, I believed then that this country was more committed to freedom than the Soviet Union. We could still claim some moral authority as the leader of what we then referred to as "the free world," however compromised or imperfect our actions were.

That moral authority, however, is now gone. US leaders fully support and unapologetically serve an ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza. They sell weapons to nearly every regime imaginable, irrespective of human rights violations. They wage war without Congressional approval — the recent 12-day assault on Iran being just the latest example.

(The second Trump administration has, in fact, launched almost as many air strikes, especially in Yemen and Somalia, in its first five months as the Biden administration did in four years.) Those same leaders have been doing a bang-up job dismantling the America I thought I was serving when I took that oath and put on second lieutenant's bars four decades ago. That America — assuming it ever existed — may now be gone forever.

FUBAR: A republic in ruins
My fellow citizens, America is FUBAR (a term that dates from World War II). We are not faintly who we claim to be. Rather than a functioning republic, we are an ailing, flailing, perhaps even failing empire. We embrace war, glorify warriors, and profit mightily from the global arms trade, no matter the civilian toll, including tens of thousands of dead and wounded children in Gaza, among the latest victims of US-made bombs, bullets, and missiles. Signs of moral rot are everywhere. Our president, who



would like to be known for his budget cuts, nonetheless giddily celebrates a record trillion-dollar war budget. Our secretary of defense gleefully promotes a warrior ethos. Congress almost unanimously supports or acquiesces in the destruction of Gaza. Images from the region resemble bombed-out Stalingrad in 1942 or Berlin in 1945. Meanwhile, for more than two decades now, America's leaders have claimed to be waging a successful global "war on terror" even as they fuel terror across the globe. What do they think all those US weapons are for — spreading peace?

My wife and I cope through dark humor. We see news on cuts to Medicaid, the mentally ill in the streets, and crumbling infrastructure, and quip: "But Bibi [Netanyahu] needs bombs. Or Ukraine does. Or the Pentagon needs more nukes." That's why Americans can't have nice things like health care. That's why all too many of us are unhoused, in debt, out of work, and desperate. In 1967 — yes, that's almost 60 years ago! — Martin Luther King warned of exactly this: America's approaching spiritual death through militarism (aggravated by extreme materialism and racism). That death is visibly here, now. Washington is not even faintly committed to "peace through strength," a vapid slogan touted by the Trump administration, and an unintentional echo of George Orwell's dystopian "war is peace." It is committed instead to what passes for dominance through colossal military spending and persistent war. And let's face it, that warpath may well end in the death of the American experiment.

Mediocrity of US generals
In this era of creeping authoritarianism and mass surveillance, perhaps the US is lucky that its generals are, by and large, so utterly uninspired. Today's American military isn't open to the mercurial and meteoric talents of a Napoleon or a Caesar. Not in its upper ranks, at least. One struggles to name a truly great American general or admiral since World War II. That war produced household names like George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, George S. Patton, and Chester W. Nimitz. In contrast, America's recent generals — Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell of Desert Storm fame, Tommy Franks in Iraq in 2003, David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal of the "fragile" and "reversible" Iraq and Afghan

"surges" — have left anything but a legacy of excellence or moral leadership, not to speak of decisive victory. At best, they were narrowly competent; at worst, morally compromised and dangerously deluded. Mind you, this isn't a criticism of this country's rank-and-file troops. The young Americans I served with showed no lack of courage. It wasn't their fault that the wars they found themselves in were misbegotten and mismanaged. Twenty years have passed since I served alongside those young troops, glowing with pride and purpose in their dedication, their idealism, their commitment to their oath of service. Many paid a high price in limbs, minds, or lives. Too often, they were lions led by donkeys, to borrow a phrase once used to describe the inept and callous British leadership during World War I at bloody battles like the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917). Today, I fear that America's lions may, sooner or later, be led into even deeper catastrophe — this time possibly a war with China. Any conflict with China would likely rival, if not surpass, the disasters produced by World War I. The world's best military, which US presidents have been telling us we have since the 9/11 attacks of September 2001, stands all too close to being committed to just such a war in Asia by donkeys like Donald Trump and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. And for what? The island of Taiwan is often mentioned, but the actual reason would undoubtedly be to preserve imperial hegemony in the service of corporate interests. War, as General Smedley Butler wrote in 1935 after he retired from the military, is indeed a racket, one from which the rich exempt themselves (except when it comes to taking profits from the same). A disastrous conflict with China, likely ending in a US defeat (or a planetary one), could very well lead to a repeat of some even more extreme version of Trump's Make America Great Again campaign, amplified and intensified by humiliation and resentment. From the ashes of that possible defeat, an American Napoleon or Caesar (or at least a wannabe imitator) could very well emerge to administer the coup de grace to what's left of our democracy and freedom.

Avoiding colossal act of folly
War with China isn't, of course, inevitable, but America's current posture makes it more likely. Trump's tariffs, his bombastic rhetoric, and this country's ex-

tensive military exercises in the Pacific contribute to rising tensions, not de-escalation and rapprochement. While this country invests in war and more war, China invests in infrastructure and trade, in the process becoming what the US used to be: the world's indispensable workhorse. As the 10 BRICS countries, including China, expand and global power becomes more multipolar, this country's addiction to military dominance may drive it to lash out. With ever more invested in a massive military war hammer, impetuous leaders like Trump and Hegseth may see China as just another nail to be driven down. It would, of course, be a colossal act of folly, though anything but a first in history. And speaking of folly, the US military, as it's configured today, is remarkably similar to the force I joined in 1985. The focus remains on ultra-expensive weapons systems, including the dodgy F-35 jet fighter, the unnecessary B-21 Raider bomber, the escalatory Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, and Trump's truly fantastical "Golden Dome" missile defense system (a ghostly rehash of President Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" proposal, vintage 1983). Other militaries, meanwhile, are improvising, notably in low-cost drone technology (also known as UAS, or uncrewed autonomous systems) as seen in the Russia-Ukraine War, a crucial new arena of war-making where the US has fallen significantly behind China. The Pentagon's "solution" here is to continue the massive funding of Cold War-era weapons systems while posing as open to innovation, as an embarrassing video of Hegseth walking with drones suggests. America's military is, in short, well-prepared to fight a major conventional war

against an obliging enemy like Iraq in 1991, but such a scenario is unlikely to lie in our future. With respect to drones or UAS, I can hear the wheels of the military-industrial complex grinding away. A decentralized, low-cost, flexible cottage industry will likely be transformed into a centralized, high-cost, inflexible cash cow for the merchants of death. When the Pentagon faces a perceived crisis or shortfall, the answer is always to throw more money at it. Ka-ching! Indeed, the recent profit margins of major military contractors like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and RTX (formerly Raytheon) have been astounding. Since 9/11, Boeing's stock has risen more than 400%. RTX shares are up more than 600%. Lockheed Martin, maker of the faltering F-35, has seen its shares soar by nearly 1,000%. And Northrop Grumman, maker of the B-21 Raider bomber and Sentinel ICBM, two legs of America's "modernized" nuclear triad, has seen its shares increase by more than 1,400%. Who says that war (even the threat of a global nuclear war) doesn't pay? Meanwhile, the Pentagon's war budget, soaring to unprecedented levels, has been virtually immune to DOGE cuts. While Elon Musk and his whiz kids searched for a few billion in savings by gutting education or squelching funding for public media like PBS and NPR, the Pentagon emerged with about \$160 billion in new spending authority. As president Biden once reminded us: Show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value. Far too often, America's leaders, whatever they've said in their election campaigns, have valued weapons and wars over almost anything else.

The full article first appeared on TomDispatch.



The most recent US presidents from left to right: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and current US President Donald Trump
● ELISE SWAIN/THE INTERCEPT

Images from Gaza resemble bombed-out Stalingrad in 1942 or Berlin in 1945. Meanwhile, for more than two decades now, America's leaders have claimed to be waging a successful global "war on terror" even as they fuel terror across the globe. What do they think all those US weapons are for — spreading peace?

The illustration shows US dollars raining over a picture of US President Donald Trump looking at an image of an F-47 sixth-generation fighter jet in the Oval Office at the White House.
● FOX NEWS