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## American Jihad 2014 The New Fundamentalists

By Tom Engelhardt

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In a 1950s civics textbook of mine, I can remember a Martian landing on Main Street, U.S.A., to be instructed in the glories of our political system. You know, our tripartite government, checks and balances, miraculous set of rights, and vibrant democracy. There was, Americans then thought, much to be proud of, and so for that generation of children, many Martians were instructed in the American way of life. These days, I suspect, not so many.

Still, I wondered just what lessons might be offered to such a Martian crash-landing in Washington as 2014 begins. Certainly checks, balances, rights, and democracy wouldn't top any New Year's list. Since my childhood, in fact, that tripartite government has grown a fourth part, a national security state that is remarkably unchecked and unbalanced. In recent times, that labyrinthine structure of intelligence agencies morphing into war-fighting outfits, the U.S. military (with its own secret military, the special operations forces, gestating inside it), and the Department of Homeland Security, a monster conglomeration of agencies that is an actual "defense department," as well as a vast contingent of weapons makers, contractors, and profiteers bolstered by an army of lobbyists, has never stopped growing. It has won the undying fealty of Congress, embraced the power of the presidency, made itself into a jobs program for the American people, and been largely free to do as it pleased with almost unlimited taxpayer dollars.

The expansion of Washington's national security state -- let's call it the NSS -- to gargantuan proportions has historically met little opposition. In the wake of the Edward Snowden revelations, however, some resistance has arisen, especially when it comes to the "right" of one part of the NSS to turn the world into a listening post and gather, in particular, American communications of every sort. The debate about this -- invariably framed within the boundaries of whether or not we should have more security or more privacy and how exactly to balance the two -- has been reasonably vigorous. The problem is: it doesn't begin to get at the real nature of the NSS or the problems it poses.

If I were to instruct that stray Martian lost in the nation's capital, I might choose another framework entirely for my lesson. After all, the focus of the NSS, which has like an incubus grown to monumental proportions inside the body of the political system, would seem distinctly monomaniacal, if only we could step outside our normal way of thinking for a moment. At a cost of nearly a trillion dollars a year, its main global enemy consists of thousands of lightly armed *jihadis* and wannabe *jihadis* scattered mainly across the backlands of the planet. They are capable of causing genuine damage -- though far less to the United States than numerous other countries -- but not of shaking our way of life. And yet for the leaders, bureaucrats, corporate cronies, rank and file, and acolytes of the NSS, it's a focus that can never be intense enough on behalf of a system that can never grow large enough or be well funded enough.

None of the frameworks we normally call on to understand the national security state capture the irrationality, genuine inanity, and actual madness that lie at its heart. Perhaps reimagining what has developed in these last decades as a faith-based system -- a new national religion -- would help. This, at least, is the way I would explain the new Washington to that wayward Martian.

## **Holy Warriors**

Imagine what we call "national security" as, at heart, a proselytizing warrior religion. It has its holy orders. It has its sacred texts (classified). It has its dogma and its warrior priests. It has its sanctified promised land, known as "the homeland." It has its seminaries, which we call think tanks. It is a monotheistic faith in that it broaches no alternatives to itself. It is Manichean in its view of the world. As with so many religions, its god is an eye in the sky, an all-seeing Being who knows your secrets.

Edward Snowden, the man who in 2013 pulled back the curtain on part of this system, revealing its true nature to anyone who cared to look, is an apostate, never to be forgiven by those in its holy orders. He is a Judas to be hunted down, returned to the U.S., put on trial as a "traitor," and then -- so say some retired NSS warriors (who often channel the opinions and feelings of those still in office) -- hung by the neck until dead or swung "from a tall oak tree."

Al-Qaeda is, of course, the system's Devil, whose evil seed is known to land and breed anywhere on the planet from Sana'a, Yemen, to Boston, Massachusetts, if we are not eternally and ever more on guard. In the name of the epic global struggle against it and the need to protect the homeland, nothing is too much, no step taken a point too far. (As the Devil is traditionally a shape-shifter, able to manifest himself in many forms, it is, however, possible that tomorrow's version of him may be, say, China.)

The leaders of this faith-based system are, not surprisingly, fundamentalist true believers. They don't wear long beards, wave the Koran, shout "Death to the Great Satan," or live in the backlands of the planet. Instead, they speak bureaucratically, tend to sport military uniforms and medals, and inhabit high-tech government facilities. Fundamentalist as they are, they may not, in the normal sense, be religious at all. They are not obliged to believe in the importance of being "born again" or fear being "left behind" in a future End Times -- though such beliefs don't disqualify them either.

They issue the equivalent of *fatwas* against those they proclaim to be their enemies. They have a set of Sharia-like laws, both immutable and flexible. Punishments for breaking them may not run to stoning to death or the cutting off of hands, but they do involve the cutting off of lives.

Theirs is an implacable warrior religion, calling down retribution on people often seen only poorly by video feed, thousands of miles distant from Washington, D.C., Langley, Virginia, or Fort Meade, Maryland. It's no mistake that the weapons fired by their fleet of drone aircraft are called Hellfire missiles, since it is indeed hellfire and brimstone that they believe they are delivering to the politically sinful of the world. Nor is it a happenstance that the planes which fire those missiles have been dubbed Predators and Reapers (as in "Grim"), for they do see themselves as the annointed deliverers of Death to their enemies.

While they have a powerful urge to maintain the faith the American public has in them, they also believe deeply that they know best, that their knowledge is the Washington equivalent of God-given, and that the deepest mysteries and secrets of their faith should be held close indeed.

Until you enter their orders and rise into their secret world, there is such a thing as too-much knowledge. As a result, they have developed a faith-based system of secrecy in which the deepest mysteries have, until recently, been held by the smallest numbers of believers, in which problems are adjudicated in a "court" system so secret that only favored arguments by the national security state can be presented to its judges, in which just about any document produced, no matter how anodyne, will be classified as too dangerous to be read by "the people." This has meant that, until recently, most assessments of the activities of the national security state have to be taken on faith.

In addition, in the service of that faith, NSS officials may -- and their religion permits this -- lie to and manipulate the public, Congress, allies, or anyone else, and do so without compunction. They may publicly deny realities they know to exist, or offer, as Conor Friedersdorf has written, statements "exquisitely crafted to mislead." They do this based on the belief that the deepest secrets of their world and how it operates can only truly be understood by those already inducted into their orders. And yet, they are not simply manipulating us in service to their One True Faith. Nothing is ever that simple. Before they manipulate us, they must spend years manipulating themselves. Only because they have already convinced themselves of the deeper truth of their mission do they accept the necessity of manipulating others in what still passes for a democracy. To serve the people, in other words, they have no choice but to lie to them.

Like other religious institutions in their heyday, the NSS has also shown a striking ability to generate support for its ever-growing structure by turning itself into a lucrative global operation. In a world where genuine enemies are in remarkably short supply (though you'd never know it from the gospel according to them), it has exhibited remarkable skill in rallying those who might support it financially, whether they call themselves Democrats or Republicans, and ensuring, even in budgetary tough times, that its coffers will continue to burst at the seams.

It has also worked hard to expand what, since 1961, has been known as the military-industrial complex. In the twenty-first century, the NSS has put special effort into subsidizing warrior corporations ready to enter the global battlefield with it. In the process, it has "privatized" -- that is, corporatized -- its global operations. It has essentially merged with a set of crony outfits that now do a significant part of its work. It has hired private contractors by the tens of thousands, creating corporate spies, corporate analysts, corporate mercenaries, corporate builders, and corporate providers for a structure that is increasingly becoming the profit-center of a state within a state. All of this, in turn, helps to support a growing theocratic warrior class in the luxury to which it has become accustomed.

Since 9/11, the result has been a religion of perpetual conflict whose doctrines tend to grow ever more extreme. In our time, for instance, the NSS has moved from Dick Cheney's "1% doctrine" (if there's even a 1% chance that some country might someday attack us, we should strike first) to something like a "0% doctrine." Whether in its drone wars with their presidential "kill lists" or the cyber war -- probably the first in history -- that it launched against Iran, it no longer cares to argue most of the time that such strikes need even a 1% justification. Its ongoing, self-proclaimed global war, whether on the ground or in the air, in person or by drone, in space or cyberspace (where its newest military command is already in action) is justification enough for just about any act, however aggressive.

Put all this together and what you have is a description of a militant organization whose purpose is to carry out a Washington version of global *jihad*, a perpetual war in the name of the true faith.

### **A Practical Failure, A Faith-Based Success Story**

Looked at another way, the national security state is also a humongous humbug, a gigantic fraud of a belief system that only delivers because its followers never choose to look at the world through Martian eyes.

Let's start with its gargantuan side. No matter how you cut it, the NSS is a Ripley's Believe It or Not of staggering numbers that, once you step outside its thought system, don't add up. The U.S. national defense budget is estimated to be larger than those of the next 13 countries combined -- that is, simply off-the-charts more expensive. The U.S. Navy has 11 aircraft carrier strike groups when no other country has more than two. No other national security outfit can claim to sweep up "nearly five billion records a day on the whereabouts of cellphones around the world"; nor, like the National Security Agency's Special Source Operations group in 2006, boast about being capable of ingesting the equivalent of "one Library of Congress every 14.4 seconds"; nor does it have any competitors when it comes to constructing "building complexes for top-secret

intelligence work” (33 in the Washington area alone between 2001 and 2010). And its building programs around the U.S. and globally are never-ending.

It is creating a jet fighter that will be the most expensive weapons system in history. Its weapons makers controlled 78% of the global arms market in 2012. When its military departed Iraq after eight years of invasion and occupation, it left with three million objects ranging from armored vehicles to laptop computers and porta-potties (and destroyed or handed over to the Iraqis countless more). In a world where other countries have, at best, a handful of military bases outside their territory, it has countless hundreds. In 2011 alone, it managed to classify 92,064,862 of the documents it generated, giving secrecy a new order of magnitude. And that’s just to dip a toe in the ocean of a national security state that dwarfs the one which fought the Cold War against an actual imperial superpower.

Again, if you were to step outside the world of NSS dogma and the arguments that go with it, such numbers -- and they are legion -- would surely represent one of the worst investments in modern memory. If a system of this sort weren’t faith-based, and if that faith weren’t widespread and deeply accepted (even if now possibly on the wane), people would automatically look at such numbers and the results they deliver and ask why, for all its promises of safety and security, the NSS so regularly fails to deliver. And why the response to failure can always be encapsulated in one word: more.

After all, if the twenty-first century has taught us anything, it’s that the most expensive and over-equipped military on the planet can’t win a war. Its two multi-trillion-dollar attempts since 9/11, in Iraq and Afghanistan, both against lightly armed minority insurgencies, proved disasters. (In Iraq, however, despite an ignominious U.S. pullout and the chaos that has followed in the region, the NSS and its supporters have continued to promote the idea that General David Petraeus’s “surge” was indeed some kind of historic last-minute “victory.”)

After 12 long years in Afghanistan and an Obama era surge in that country, the latest grim National Intelligence Estimate from the U.S. intelligence community suggests that no matter what Washington now does, the likelihood is that things there will only go from bad enough to far worse. Years of a drone campaign against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has strengthened that organization; an air intervention in Libya led to chaos, a dead ambassador, and a growing al-Qaeda movement in northern Africa -- and so it repetitively goes.

Similarly, intelligence officials brag of terrorist plots -- 54 of them! -- that have been broken up thanks in whole or in part to the National Security Agency’s metadata sweeps of U.S. phone calls; it also claims that, given the need of secrecy, only four of them can be made public. (The claims of success on even those four, when examined by journalists, have proved less than impressive.) Meanwhile, the presidential task force charged with reviewing the NSA revelations, which had access to a far wider range of insider information, came to an even more startling conclusion: not one instance could be found in which that metadata the NSA was storing in bulk had thwarted a terrorist plot. “Our review,” the panel wrote, “suggests that the information contributed to terrorist investigations by the use of section 215 telephony meta-data was not essential to preventing attacks.” (And keep in mind that, based on what we do know

about such terror plots, a surprising number of them were planned or sparked or made possible by FBI-inspired plants.)

In fact, claims of success against such plots couldn't be more faith-based, relying as they generally do on the word of intelligence officials who have proven themselves untrustworthy or on the impossible-to-prove-or-disprove claim that if such a system didn't exist, far worse would have happened. That version of a success story is well summarized in the claim that "we didn't have another 9/11."

In other words, in bang-for-the-buck practical terms, Washington's national security state should be viewed as a remarkable failure. And yet, in faith-based terms, it couldn't be a greater success. Its false gods are largely accepted by acclamation and regularly worshiped in Washington and beyond. As the funding continues to pour in, the NSS has transformed itself into something like a shadow government in that city, while precluding from all serious discussion the possibility of its own future dismantlement or of what could replace it. It has made other options ephemeral and more immediate dangers than terrorism to the health and wellbeing of Americans seem, at best, secondary. It has pumped fear into the American soul. It is a religion of state power.

No Martian could mistake it for anything else.