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Perpetual war creates endless consequences

by Norman Solomon

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When the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, began this month by issuing a farewell report on U.S. military strategy, the gist was hardly big news. “Dempsey to Pentagon: Prepare for the Never-Ending War” read the headline on the cover page of the National Journal.

The “war on terror” now looks so endless that no one speculates anymore about when it might conclude. “This war, like all wars, must end,” President Barack Obama declared in a major speech more than two years ago. “That’s what history advises. That’s what our democracy demands.” But midway through 2015, this war seems as interminable as ever.

In the process, Washington has blazed trails for cross-border impunity. The U.S. government’s latest expression of contempt for international law is its full support for the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia that has been bombing Yemen since late March. (Other countries deploying jets for the airstrikes are Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan and United Arab Emirates.)

At the end of last month, Human Rights Watch criticized the air assaults in a report that cited “numerous civilian deaths and injuries.” Days later, the Associated Press reported, “a massive airstrike” by the coalition killed more than 45 civilians and wounded over 50 others on June 6 in a suburban marketplace near the Yemeni city of Aden.

“Best estimates are that about 3,000 people have been killed since the start of the Saudi bombing campaign,” says Yemeni writer Farea Al-Muslimi, a visiting scholar with the Carnegie Middle East Center. “The bombings are horrible enough, but what’s worse now is that more people are probably dying because of the blockade and food shortages. And all sides of the conflict are responsible for this.”

The Obama administration has made America a powerful role model for impunity, with unapologetic violations of international law that continue to fly drones and missiles across borders into half a dozen countries. It’s a star-spangled perversion of the Golden Rule — those who have the military power make the rule — giving Washington the globe’s lead role as high-tech destroyer of international law.

The longer it has persisted, the more America’s ongoing warfare has relied on above-it-all technologies that make war seem less consequential to people back home. Scantly reported and largely shrouded in mystery, U.S. missile strikes — whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria or Yemen — are apt to sound much more anodyne than boots on the ground.

While the automation of Uncle Sam’s killing-at-a-distance has sharply reduced American casualties, it has increasingly rendered the U.S. war path as the main avenue for pursuing its goals. And the nation’s top leaders, as well as the military contractors that profit from this tendency, appear to like it that way.

Wartime rationales of American exceptionalism are hardly new. In 1905, while U.S. forces occupied the Philippines after a savage invasion, a character in a short story by William Dean Howells gave voice to the kind of popular attitude that transcends eras: “What a thing it is to have a country that *can’t* be wrong, but if it is, is right, anyway!”

But in the 21st century, such timeworn conceits of nationalism have compounded themselves during nearly 14 years of constant war, normalized for the public as wallpaper and background noise in media echo chambers and Super Bowl flyovers. By now, most elected officials and constituents take this multi-front war for granted as an immutable necessity, however unfortunate. The cumulative, unrelenting and destructive effects are integral to federal budgets, social attitudes and political expectations.

Along the way, our warfare state has tightened its grip. And while many Democrats have long been fond of blaming the nation’s disastrous war trajectory on former President George W. Bush (along with his vice president, Dick Cheney, cast as a sort of Rasputin character), the passage of years has placed the mantle of incessant warrior-in-chief firmly on the current president’s shoulders.

Five years ago, President Obama donned a bomber jacket in Afghanistan and proclaimed to American troops at Bagram Air Base that “the United States of America does not quit once it starts on something.” Today, Obama is America’s top normalizer of perpetual war — a tragic course enabled most of all by his partisan supporters.

As a former Obama delegate to the 2008 Democratic National Convention, I deplore that party loyalty has been a key and pernicious factor since then as America has sloped further into this militarized abyss. Countless prominent Democrats and their supporters — from members of Congress to leaders of labor, environmental and social-justice organizations — have served as enablers for Obama’s reliance on military force. Some cheered it on, while others merely mumbled their misgivings or remained silent.

The largest online force among liberals, MoveOn.org, embodied the problem. MoveOn had supplied “End this Endless War” stickers for many thousands of bumpers across America during the Bush presidency. But after Obama became president, the MoveOn leadership jettisoned the bumper sticker and, in effect, signed on to perpetual war, so long as it’s led by Democrats.

It does not have to be this way. America need not propagate what Martin Luther King Jr. aptly called “the madness of militarism.” But to turn away from perpetual war, many people will first need to overcome party loyalties and summon the kind of resolve that King showed in challenging the tragic folly of war policies coming from a Democrat in the White House.