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## The Honeymoon of the Generals

By Tom Engelhardt  
April 23, 2017

MOAB sounds more like an incestuous, war-torn biblical kingdom than the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast, aka "the mother of all bombs." Still, give Donald Trump credit. Only the really, really big bombs, whether North Korean nukes or those 21,600 pounds of MOAB, truly get his attention. He wasn't even involved in the decision to drop the largest non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. arsenal for the first time in war, but his beloved generals – "we have the best military people on Earth" – already know the man they work for, and the bigger, flashier, more explosive, and winner, the better.

It was undoubtedly the awesome look of that first MOAB going off in grainy black and white on Fox News, rather than in Afghanistan, that appealed to the president. Just as he was visibly thrilled by all those picturesque Tomahawk cruise missiles, the equivalent of nearly three MOABS, whooshing from the decks of U.S. destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean and heading, like so many fabulous fireworks, toward a Syrian airfield – or was it actually an Iraqi one? "We've just fired 59 missiles," he said, "all of which hit, by the way, unbelievable, from, you know, hundreds of miles away, all of which hit, amazing... It's so incredible. It's brilliant. It's genius. Our technology, our equipment, is better than anybody by a factor of five."

Call it thrilling. Call it a blast. Call it escalation. Or just call it the age of Trump. ("If you look at what's happened over the last eight weeks and compare that really to what's happened over the

past eight years, you'll see there's a tremendous difference, tremendous difference," he commented, adding about MOAB, "This was another very, very successful mission.")

Anyway, here we are and, as so many of his critics have pointed out, the plaudits have been pouring in from all the usual media and political suspects for a president with big enough... well, hands, to make war impressively. In our world, this is what now passes for "presidential." Consider that praise the media version of so many Tomahawk missiles pointing us toward what the escalation of America's never-ending wars will mean to Trump's presidency.

These days, from Syria to Afghanistan, the Koreas to Somalia, Yemen to Iraq, it's easy enough to see Commander-in-Chief Donald Trump as something new under the sun. (It has a different ring to it when the commander in chief says, "You're fired!") That missile strike in Syria was a first (Obama didn't dare); the MOAB in Afghanistan was a breakthrough; the drone strikes in Yemen soon after he took office were an absolute record! As for those regular Army troops heading for Somalia, that hasn't happened in 24 years! Civilian casualties in the region: rising impressively!

Call it mission creep on steroids. At the very least, it seems like evidence that the man who, as a presidential candidate, swore he'd "bomb the shit" out of ISIS and let the U.S. military win again is doing just that. (As he also said on the campaign trail with appropriately placed air punches, "You gotta knock the hell out of them! Boom! Boom! Boom!")

He's appointed generals to crucial posts in his administration, lifted restraints on how his commanders in the field can act (hence those soaring civilian casualty figures), let them send more military personnel into Iraq, Syria, and the region generally, taken the constraints off the CIA's drone assassination campaigns, and dispatched an aircraft carrier strike group somewhat indirectly to the waters off the Koreas (with a strike force of tweets and threats accompanying it).

And there's obviously more to come: potentially many more troops, even an army of them, for Syria; a possible mini-surge of troops into Afghanistan (that MOAB strike may have been a canny signal from a U.S. commander "seeking to showcase Afghanistan's myriad threats" to a president paying no attention); a heightened air campaign in Somalia; and that's just to start what will surely be a far longer list in a presidency in which, whether or not infrastructure is ever successfully rebuilt in America, the infrastructure of the military-industrial complex will continue to expand.

### **Institutionalizing War and Its Generals**

Above all, President Trump did one thing decisively. He empowered a set of generals or retired generals – James "Mad Dog" Mattis as secretary of defense, H.R. McMaster as national security adviser, and John Kelly as secretary of homeland security – men already deeply implicated in America's failing wars across the Greater Middle East. Not being a details guy himself, he's then left them to do their damndest. "What I do is I authorize my military," he told reporters recently. "We have given them total authorization and that's what they're doing and, frankly, that's why they've been so successful lately."

As the 100-day mark of his presidency approaches, there's been no serious reassessment of America's endless wars or how to fight them (no less end them). Instead, there's been a recommitment to doing more of the familiar, more of what hasn't worked over the last decade and a half. No one should be surprised by this, given the cast of characters – men who held command posts in those unsuccessful wars and are clearly incapable of thinking about them in other terms than the ones that have been indelibly engrained in the brains of the U.S. military high command since soon after 9/11.

That new ruling reality of our American world should, in turn, offer a hint about the nature of Donald Trump's presidency. It should be a reminder that as strange... okay, bizarre... as his statements, tweets, and acts may have been, as chaotic as his all-in-the-family administration is proving to be, as little as he may resemble anyone we've ever seen in the White House before, he's anything but an anomaly of history. Quite the opposite. Like those generals, he's a logical endpoint to a grim process, whether you're talking about the growth of inequality in America and the rise of plutocracy – without which a billionaire president and his billionaire cabinet would have been inconceivable – or the form that American war-making is taking under him.

When it comes to war and the U.S. military, none of what's happened would have been conceivable without the two previous presidencies. None of it would have been possible without Congress's willingness to pump endless piles of money into the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex in the post-9/11 years; without the building up of the national security state and its 17 (yes, 17!) major intelligence outfits into an unofficial fourth branch of government; without the institutionalization of war as a permanent (yet strangely distant) feature of American life and of wars across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa that evidently can't be won or lost but only carried on into eternity. None of this would have been possible without the growing militarization of this country, including of police forces increasingly equipped with weaponry off America's distant battlefields and filled with veterans of those same wars; without a media rife with retired generals and other former commanders narrating and commenting on the acts of their successors and protégés; and without a political class of Washington pundits and politicians taught to revere that military.

In other words, however original Donald Trump may look, he's the curious culmination of old news and a changing country. Given his bravado and braggadocio, it's easy to forget the kinds of militarized extremity that preceded him.

After all, it wasn't Donald Trump who had the hubris, in the wake of 9/11, to declare a "Global War on Terror" against 60 countries (the "swamp" of that moment). It wasn't Donald Trump who manufactured false intelligence on the weapons of mass destruction Iraq's Saddam Hussein supposedly possessed or produced bogus claims about that autocrat's connections to al-Qaeda, and then used both to lead the United States into a war on and occupation of that country. It wasn't Donald Trump who invaded Iraq (whether he was for or against the invasion at the time). It wasn't Donald Trump who donned a flight suit and landed on an aircraft carrier off the coast of San Diego to personally declare that hostilities were at an end in Iraq just as they were truly beginning, and to do so under an inane "Mission Accomplished" banner prepared by the White House.

It wasn't Donald Trump who ordered the CIA to kidnap terror suspects (including totally innocent individuals) off the streets of global cities as well as from the backlands of the planet and transport them to foreign prisons or CIA "black sites" where they could be tortured. It wasn't Donald Trump who caused one terror suspect to experience the sensation of drowning 83 times in a single month (even if he was inspired by such reports to claim that he would bring torture back as president).

It wasn't Donald Trump who spent eight years in the Oval Office presiding over a global "kill list," running "Terror Tuesday" meetings, and personally helping choose individuals around the world for the CIA to assassinate using what, in essence, was the president's own private drone force, while being praised (or criticized) for his "caution."

It wasn't Donald Trump who presided over the creation of a secret military of 70,000 elite troops cossetted inside the larger military, special-ops personnel who, in recent years, have been dispatched on missions to a large majority of the countries on the planet without the knowledge, no less the consent, of the American people. Nor was it Donald Trump who managed to lift the Pentagon budget to \$600 billion and the overall national security budget to something like a trillion dollars or more, even as America's civilian infrastructure aged and buckled.

It wasn't Donald Trump who lost an estimated \$60 billion to fraud and waste in the American "reconstruction" of Iraq and Afghanistan, or who decided to build highways to nowhere and a gas station in the middle of nowhere in Afghanistan. It wasn't Donald Trump who sent in the warrior corporations to squander more in that single country than was spent on the post-World War II Marshall Plan to put all of Western Europe back on its feet. Nor did he instruct the U.S. military to dump at least \$25 billion into rebuilding, retraining, and rearming an Iraqi army that would collapse in 2014 in the face of a relatively small number of ISIS militants, or at least \$65 billion into an Afghan army that would turn out to be filled with ghost soldiers.

In its history, the United States has engaged in quite a remarkable range of wars and conflicts. Nonetheless, in the last 15 years, forever war has been institutionalized as a feature of everyday life in Washington, which, in turn, has been transformed into a permanent war capital. When Donald Trump won the presidency and inherited those wars and that capital, there was, in a sense, no one left in the remarkably bankrupt political universe of Washington but those generals.

As the chameleon he is, he promptly took on the coloration of the militarized world he had entered and appointed "his" three generals to key security posts. Anything but the norm historically, such a decision may have seemed anomalous and out of the American tradition. That, however, was only because, unlike Donald Trump, most of the rest of us hadn't caught up with where that "tradition" had actually taken us.

The previous two presidents had played the warrior regularly, donning military outfits – in his presidential years, George W. Bush often looked like a G.I. Joe doll – and saluting the troops, while praising them to the skies, as the American people were also trained to do. In the Trump era, however, it's the warriors (if you'll excuse the pun) who are playing the president.

It's hardly news that Donald Trump is a man in love with what works. Hence, Steve Bannon, his dream strategist while on the campaign trail, is now reportedly on the ropes as his White House counselor because nothing he's done in the first nearly 100 days of the new presidency has worked (except promoting himself).

Think of Trump as a chameleon among presidents and much of this makes more sense. A Republican who had been a Democrat for significant periods of his life, he conceivably could have run for president as a more nativist version of Bernie Sanders on the Democratic ticket had the political cards been dealt just a little differently. He's a man who has changed himself repeatedly to fit his circumstances and he's doing so again in the Oval Office.

In the world of the media, it's stylish to be shocked, shocked that the president who campaigned on one set of issues and came into office still championing them is now supporting quite a different set – from China to taxes, NATO to the Export-Import Bank. But this isn't faintly strange. Donald Trump isn't either a politician or a trendsetter. If anything, he's a trend-senser. (In a similar fashion, he didn't create reality TV, nor was he at its origins. He simply perfected a form that was already in development.)

If you want to know just where we are in an America that has been on the march toward a different sort of society and governing system for a long time now, look at him. He's the originator of nothing, but he tells you all you need to know. On war, too, think of him as a chameleon. Right now, war is working for him domestically, whatever it may be doing in the actual world, so he loves it. For the moment, those generals are indeed "his" and their wars his to embrace.

### **Honeymoon of the Generals**

Normally, on entering the Oval Office, presidents receive what the media calls a "honeymoon" period. Things go well. Praise is forthcoming. Approval ratings are heart-warming.

Donald Trump got none of this. His approval ratings quickly headed for the honeymoon cellar or maybe the honeymoon fallout shelter; the media and he went to war; and one attempt after another to fulfill his promises – from executive orders on deportation to repealing Obamacare and building his wall – have come a cropper. His administration seems to be in eternal chaos, the cast of characters changing by the week or tweet, and few key secondary posts being filled.

In only one area has Donald Trump experienced that promised honeymoon. Think of it as the honeymoon of the generals. He gave them that "total authorization," and the missiles left the ships, the drones flew, and the giant bomb dropped. Even when the results were disappointing, if not disastrous (as in a raid on Yemen in which a U.S. special operator was killed, children slaughtered, and nothing of value recovered), he still somehow stumbled into highly praised "presidential" moments.

So far, in other words, the generals are the only ones who have delivered for him, big-league. As a result, he's given them yet more authority to do whatever they want, while hugging them tighter yet.

Here's the problem, though: there's a predictable element to all of this and it doesn't work in Donald Trump's favor. America's forever wars have now been pursued by these generals and others like them for more than 15 years across a vast swath of the planet – from Pakistan to Libya (and ever deeper into Africa) – and the chaos of failing states, growing conflicts, and spreading terror movements has been the result. There's no reason to believe that further military action will, a decade and a half later, produce more positive results.

What happens, then? What happens when the war honeymoon is over and the generals keep right on fighting their way? The last two presidents put up with permanent failing war, making the best they could of it. That's unlikely for Donald Trump. When the praise begins to die down, the criticism starts to rise, and questions are asked, watch out.

What then? In a world of plutocrats and generals, what coloration will Donald Trump take on next? Who will be left, except Jared and Ivanka?