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A Militarist Foreign Policy Means More Death and Destruction

by Gregory Bresige
September 19, 2012

“A feeling has been growing for a long time — even before Viet Nam — that the presidency was somehow out of hand. The White House has been building to some kind of smash.”
— George Reedy, former aide to President Lyndon Johnson

“More and more it appears that the art of governing is the art of deceiving on a large scale.”
— Robert Nisbet, The Twilight of Authority.

Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney will continue an American empire that hurts the country and much of the rest of the world. They both believe in an interventionist, militarist foreign policy that goes back at least as far as 1945. It constitutes a grave threat to American liberties and economic well-being. The foreign policy of nation building, bombing, and interventions around the globe will continue regardless of which major candidate wins. It is a bellicose bipartisan foreign policy.

These inescapable conclusions are the result of reviewing the record of Obama and the comments and writings of his Republican challenger.

Mitt Romney advocates American “greatness,” a euphemism for militarism. It will lead to a bigger state. And war is more than the health of the state. It is the perpetuation of the state through runaway spending, inflation, snooping, and social engineering.

Reviewing the records of these two candidates, no one voting for either can believe in a smaller, more pacific state or a government that even pretends to the principles of a peaceful foreign policy emphasizing trade. That philosophy calls for “a maximum of intercourse between people and a minimum of intercourse between governments,” as George Washington put it in his Farewell Address.

No change

Four years ago Obama promised “change.” Yet his foreign policy has been a continuation of America as the world’s policeman, supposedly the thing he was running against in 2008. Like his pledge of a booming economy, it is a broken promise.

Indeed, his disastrous foreign-policy record, combined with his anti-civil libertarian policies, have not changed the American national-security state’s frequent armed interventions that go from Harry Truman and his Truman Doctrine and loyalty oaths, to George W. Bush’s wars around the world, or the USA PATRIOT Act at home.

How different has been the approach of this so-called path-breaking president? Actually, Obama has pursued a foreign policy remarkably similar to that of his unpopular predecessor.

Mistakes repeated

In Afghanistan, Obama not only sent more troops, but in May he said U.S. troops would be there until 2014. Many more Americans could die in Afghanistan over the next two years. Yet the president seemed aware of the war’s unpopularity with Americans. He recently said that the United States would not keep troops “a single day longer than is absolutely necessary.” Nevertheless, he also promised to “finish the job” and “end the war responsibly.”

“End the war responsibly” sounds similar to the rhetoric of Richard Nixon, who said his policy would provide “peace with honor” in the Vietnam War. Americans and Vietnamese got neither as more and more people died.

During the 1968 campaign, Nixon had offered “a secret plan” to end the unpopular war in Vietnam. Little did the voters realize the plan would lead to the expansion of war through bombing.

Still, Nixon hadn’t started the war in Vietnam. He inherited it from Lyndon Johnson. By the late 1960s, many Americans felt betrayed by Johnson. His foreign policy had made a mockery of his 1964 election peace promises.

Nixon, like Obama later, continued the war he didn’t start, even though he was constantly announcing partial American troop withdrawals on the basis of the idea that the South Vietnamese, like the Afghanistan people today, were ready to take over the war so Americans could go home with “honor.”

Yet Nixon was warned by French president Charles de Gaulle, a man Nixon respected, that the only sensible American approach was immediate withdrawal from Vietnam.

Nixon, like Obama, ignored good advice. And more Americans actually died in Vietnam during Nixon's years as president than during the Johnson years.

A difference?

Although Obama and Romney both seek to document foreign-policy differences, the differences are those of tone, not substance. Their foreign policies have affected and will continue to profoundly affect, and sometimes threaten, other nations.

Those policies, which emphasize war over peaceful engagement, have a secondary effect. They will inevitably infringe on, if not will ultimately destroy, Americans' liberties at home. That is an inevitable by-product of all empires and imperial adventures.

Obama has done nothing to dismantle the national- security state that was installed and gradually built up over decades after World War II. To the contrary, in some ways, he has added to and defended it.

Daddy to Mommy

"President Obama," writes columnist Michael Gerson has "continued George W. Bush's global war on terror." From the PATRIOT Act to Guantanamo Bay, he writes, the president has expanded the national-security state.

"The mommy party," Gerson continues, "in this instance, has become daddy with a drone and a hit list."

Indeed, Obama, in signing the \$662 billion National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2012, did more than approve more military appropriations. The act includes economic sanctions against Iran, China, and Russia.

Those principles, as we will see later, are in keeping with Mitt Romney's thinking. They are also an enlargement of the American garrison state. It is ostensibly designed to stop terrorists, but it also allows the government to curtail American liberties.

The NDAA's Title 10 section, which covers new counter-terrorism powers, has two key subsections, 1021 and 1022. They allow "indefinite detention without trial." This act, along with Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), confers upon presidents frightening new detention powers, not only over foreign nationals, but over American citizens.

Anyone can be detained indefinitely "without trial, until the end of hostilities authorized by the [AUMF]," according to the NDAA. The law also sanctions trial by military tribunal, or the "transfer to the custody of control of the persons' country or origin."

Another *Ex Parte Milligan*?

These draconian laws seem clear violations of the U.S. Supreme Court's post-Civil War decision in *Ex Parte Milligan* of 1866. That decision held that civilians couldn't be tried in military courts in places where martial law was not in force and where civil courts were open.

(Lambdin Milligan was a Copperhead who objected to Lincoln's war policies. Copperheads were American Civil War dissenters who believed that the South should have been allowed to succeed. Although a civilian, Milligan was tried and sentenced to death by a military court in Indiana. The U.S. Supreme Court later threw out the military court's decision. It held that the court lacked jurisdiction because Milligan had never joined the armed forces or subscribed the Articles of War).

The ACLU and a federal court have raised objections to the NDAA and AUMF. Earlier this year, a federal court issued an order blocking the indefinite detention provisions of the NDAA.

What has been the Obama administration's response? Attorneys representing the administration are appealing the court order.

Obama's war

George W. Bush began America's war in Afghanistan. But now it is Barack Obama's war. What are the results?

Nearly 1,500 young Americans have died in Afghanistan over the past three and a half years and nearly 2,100 Americans have died since 2001. And that does not count the tens of thousands of veterans who have been injured or who have committed suicide owing to war causes. It is a cost of empire that links Obama and all previous presidents who pursued or went along with empire.

"Among all veterans, a suicide occurs every 80 minutes around the clock," *Time Magazine* reports. "More U.S. military personnel have died by suicide since the war in Afghanistan began than have died fighting there," according to the magazine. It also said the veterans' suicide rate is up 18 percent this year.

The cost of war also includes the deaths of non-Americans. Many others have died because of American bombing, nation building, and the frequent use of drones.

Another Johnson or Nixon?

Obama has become a prisoner of history. His Afghanistan policies have repeated a deceptive policy of imperial presidents for more than a century. The pattern is this: Promise one thing. Do the opposite. Tell Americans you want peace and are tired of the frequent interventions around the globe, as Bush famously said during the presidential debates of 2000. Run as a peace candidate. Then, once in office, do what you want.

Two years into World War I, Woodrow Wilson in 1916 campaigned for re-election on a platform that he “kept us out of war.” A few months after his re-election, the United States entered the war.

Or campaign as a candidate with a secret plan to get out of a ruinous war, as Nixon did in 1968. Then, once in office, he expanded the war in various ways.

Or run emphasizing that “we are not about to send Americans boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” That was the spurious promise of Johnson in the 1964 election.

Obama was never elected on a platform of sending more troops to Afghanistan.

Yet the Afghanistan War, whenever the United States pulls out, will become the heritage of both Barack Obama and George W. Bush, as well as of other failed presidents. Historically literate Americans today remember the war presidencies of Johnson, Nixon, and those presidents who presided over victorious wars that could have been avoided. The latter include wars such as the Spanish-American War. And the Mexican War, viewed by many Americans as unjust. Those subscribing to that sentiment included Ulysses Grant and Congressman Abraham Lincoln.

The egregious foreign policies of those presidents came to ruin every other aspect of their presidencies, no matter how successful each might or might not have been in other policy areas.

For instance, both Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush helped turn around the economy with tax cuts early in their administrations. Their supposed successes were forgotten in the tragedies of their futile wars. Their wars ultimately ruined economies that seemed healthy until the war costs brought it down.

Both left office as hated men. Lyndon Johnson, for instance, because of the Vietnam War, decided to take himself out of the running for re-election.

Afghanistan and Vietnam

“Afghanistan may not be Barack Obama’s Vietnam,” writes David Rothkopf in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, “but that is only because it has failed to stir national tensions in the way the war in Southeast Asia did.”

Rothkopf, in an article entitled “Obama’s Debacle,” describes Obama’s Afghanistan policies, including his decision to send 30,000 more troops there, as a mix of “politics, naiveté and intellectual dishonesty.”

However, Rothkopf may eventually be wrong about whether the president’s Afghanistan policies stir up “national tensions” the way the Vietnam War did. Initially, the Vietnam War was supported by most Americans, just as the war in Iraq was.

Indeed, with enough destruction and death, with enough economic pain, the inevitable product of a war economy, the silent majority can quickly turn against the most popular president.

Lyndon Johnson won a landslide in 1964. But just a few years later, he was a pariah in his own country. He rarely ventured outside of military bases and other secure places to give speeches. He was a hated man, referred to by novelist Philip Roth as “Lying Baines Johnson.” As in the case of Truman in 1952 presiding over a war in Korea that had suddenly turned unpopular, re-election was out of the question.

Obama, like his predecessors, may or may not win re-election. But he can’t escape history or the disappointment of even some of his supporters. They live with the knowledge that they elected someone who would continue many of the foreign policies of George W. Bush. Why did he do it?

Obama, reluctant warrior?

Obama, some have speculated, was afraid that if he didn’t pursue tough foreign policies, that if he was allowed himself to be viewed as soft, his domestic agenda would be wrecked.

The president surprised many of his supporters by sending more troops to Afghanistan, reminding some Americans of previous foreign-policy mistakes. (“In for a dime, in for a dollar,” is how Johnson’s secretary of State, Dean Rusk, was said to describe increasing American military involvement in Vietnam in the early 1960s in an episode detailed in David Halberstam’s book *The Best and Brightest*.)

Why didn’t the dispatch of more troops to Afghanistan cause a media firestorm? Why weren’t the Obama voters upset? Actually, some of his supporters were.

There was some dissent within the administration, according to one media report.

The New York Times, in an article earlier this year by David Sanger, quotes the president as having second thoughts about sending more troops to Afghanistan. “I think he hated the idea from the beginning,” Sanger quotes one of the president’s advisors as saying about his boss. “The military was all in as they say and Obama wasn’t.”

Indeed, here again is another repeat of a flawed, half-hearted imperial foreign policy. Lyndon Johnson, in escalating the war in Vietnam in the mid 1960s, also was a reluctant interventionist. Or so many of his supporters say to this day.

Nevertheless he intervened. And hundreds of thousands died or were scarred for life because the imperial policy established in the presidency of Harry Truman was continued even though it was futile.

Ghosts

Echoes of previous foreign-policy failures are all around us. They haunt us like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Even some of the authors of the failures wonder about them.

George W. Bush, in his recent book, *Decision Points*, all but admits that the Iraq War was a mistake. He says it was waged to find weapons of mass destruction. Then he agrees that they were never found. He also talks about his heartbreaking visits to wounded veterans.

Lyndon Johnson, in taped phone conversations in the 1960s with Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, conceded doubts about the Vietnam War, but continued to wage it.

Robert McNamara, a defense secretary under presidents Kennedy and Johnson, admitted in his memoirs that he continued to push war policies, even after he knew the war was lost!

Obama is facing the same sort of moral enigma: fighting a war that he may hate, but believes is politically necessary.

A tragic figure

Obama is a prisoner of forces he can't control. He is Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. He is a tragic figure whose mistakes are ruining so many lives. He is like Lord Aberdeen, a pacific leader of the British aristocracy. He became prime minister in 1852, heading a coalition government. He hated war. As a young diplomat, he had been sickened by the carnage of the Napoleonic Wars.

However, his weak leadership allowed Britain to drift into the Crimean War (1854–1856). “Lord Aberdeen's heart was never in the war,” wrote J.B. Conacher in *The Aberdeen Coalition, 1852–1855*. His Russo-phobic Turkish ambassador goaded the Turks into war. The result was that Britain fought a disastrous war. One might call the Crimean War the Victorian Era's Vietnam War.

That war ultimately led to the fall of the ministry and the end of Aberdeen's career. “The ex-prime was full of bitterness at having himself dragged into the war,” a British MP said after meeting with him, as detailed in the book *Richard Cobden: A Victorian Outsider*, by Wendy Hinde.

So far, apparently, many Americans can't see the Lyndon Johnson or George W. Bush or Lord Aberdeen parallels in the case of a beloved president.

Obama is a weak president who lacks the strength, the ability, or the historical knowledge to do what a few leaders have done: admit a war was a mistake and end it before more people die. (French President Charles de Gaulle did it with respect to Algeria in the early 1960s after he inherited a dirty war, full of atrocities on both sides.) The inability to admit a mistake, to go on with a misguided policy, has been seen many times before.

But despite the myopia of many of Obama's supporters and the mainstream media, the Afghanistan war is one whose horrible costs will be a major part of the president's record.

Certainly Obama must see the futility of his interventionist policy in Afghanistan. He seemed to understand this idea when he turned power over to the Iraqi government. He seemed, however, to be under the power of the national-security state, when he continued to insist that the United

States retain bases in Iraq. That regrettable decision means the United States could easily move back into that troubled nation, another sign that the president is unclear whether he wants to move from the interventionist model.

A challenger who won't challenge

Clearly, president Obama's fortunes haven't fallen as low as Lyndon Johnson's at the end of his presidency. But that, perhaps, is because of the main alternative in this year's elections.

Mitt Romney enthusiastically embraces the ideas of the national-security state. Indeed, in some ways he believes in them more than the president.

Reading his book *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* one finds hardly any regrets about America's recent wars, or possibly *any* of America's wars.

Indeed, one of the principal positions of Romney's candidacy is that he will be tougher with supposed enemies. And he believes America has many.

An alternative?

Romney's response to Obama is a "call for greatness." For Romney, "greatness" means a bigger navy and army and for the United States to confront the rising power of China and Russia, among others. He devotes a large part of his book to explaining why the nation is slipping: It has a timid foreign policy. It has a foreign policy that apologizes for past mistakes. It doesn't spend enough on defense.

His favorite presidents are Theodore Roosevelt, a big navy man who gloried in war; Ronald Reagan, who launched a big superfluous defense buildup in the 1980s; and Harry Truman whose Truman Doctrine, which declared the United States would intervene around the world, earns Romney's praise.

The Romney Doctrine?

The Truman Doctrine, as I have detailed in these pages in the series *[The Road to the Permanent Warfare State](#)*, committed the United States in the post-World War II world to fight anywhere in which any communist threat, or even possible threat, could be documented.

It led the United States into endless wars and proxy wars all around the world. But Romney writes that "between Harry Truman and Barack Obama, give me Truman every time."

Romney's worldview is similar to the Truman Doctrine, only instead of a world communist threat, Romney points to a host of new enemies. And if pursued to its logical conclusions, his worldview will very likely lead the United States into still more wars.

Endless enemies

America's enemies, Romney says, are the Chinese, Russians, Iranians, Venezuela, terrorists, and nations in the Middle East opposed to Israel, to which he wants to give a promise of almost unlimited U.S. support. He also warns that America must be wary of almost anyone on good terms with her enemies.

Romney doesn't explicitly condemn neutrality, as 1950s Secretary of State John Foster Dulles did. Dulles famously charged that neutralism was "ill-moral." But that was a sentiment that ignored the foreign policy of the United States in its first century of its existence.

Reading Romney's comments about friends and enemies, one feels that any association with the latter could get a country in trouble during a Romney administration. Reading his jingoistic comments and writings, it is difficult to believe that the United States won't enter into another war sometime in a Romney presidency.

Romney's Chinese problem

Let us discuss the Chinese. Romney is alarmed that they are expanding their air force and navy.

"The country's investment in submarines is particularly ominous for the United States, dependent as we have always been on our sea power," he writes in *No Apology*. "Since the mid-1990s, China has commissioned more than thirty new submarines and now has an estimated sixty-two subs, only a few of which are nuclear subs."

But the United States has 71 subs, all of which are nuclear, Romney agrees. Still, he warns that "China clearly intends to catch up."

He also warns that China is catching up in combat aircraft. And despite cutbacks in the size of its army, it has nearly one million more soldiers than the United States.

Romney suggests that China has designs on several Southeast and Far East Asian nations. And the United States, acting as the policeman of the Far East, must not allow that to happen.

Who is the aggressor?

But isn't it the United States — not a regional power such as China, but a world power with interests in seemingly every dispute around the globe — that actually appears to others, including the Chinese, as an aggressive power? The United States has a dozen aircraft carriers. Each carrier is a task force that constitutes a small navy. Each has hundreds of planes and numerous accompanying ships.

The Chinese?

They're still working on their first carrier. It is not likely to be as big or effective as American carriers. The United States also has had an 11-to-1 superiority in warheads. Nevertheless, Romney calls China's military progress over the past two decades "stunning."

It has been considerable. But there are at least two holes in Romney's China fears. But first I will grant he is right on one point.

An American Prussia

If the United States is to follow Romney's recommendations, expanding its commitments around the world and getting tough with China and others, then a military buildup is needed.

For example, Romney favorably quotes an American Enterprise scholar, Dan Blumenthal, who calls for "devoting more resources to the region and strengthening U.S. allies in order to reassure them and send Beijing a message that the United States is committed to the status quo."

Certainly, if the United States is going to continue the nearly 70-year-old policy — initiated by Romney's hero Truman — of intervening everywhere, then it is going to need more armed forces. It will also need more PATRIOT Acts. Indeed, the logic of a great foreign policy leads to the unstated conclusion that the draft will also have to be reinstated.

"We must add at least 100,000 soldiers to the army and marines," Romney writes. Where will the nation get those 100,000 new troops? Will they come from an economy that is sputtering so badly that many unemployed young people will turn to the military out of desperation?

Romney doesn't mention it in his book, but how are we to close that million-man-army gap with the Chinese that worries him unless there is another draft?

Those who agree with that should be warned now: The military buildup that Romney advocates will be another step on the road to turning the United States into a modern Prussia.

Granted there is a logic to Romney's nationalistic ideas; however, is that what we want for our children and ourselves? Do we want a nation of almost constant war, near wars, and preparations for wars?

Is the policy of "fight everywhere and remake the world in our image even if we have to bomb and kill tens of thousands of people" what we want?

In other words, do we want multiple Afghanistans and Vietnams? (Interesting enough, getting the United States tied down in myriad Vietnams was the strategy advocated by communists such as Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in the 1960s. They saw it as the way to destroy capitalism.)

American weakness?

The other hole in Romney's "we must be 'great,' expand the military, and deter the Chinese" idea is the same weakness found in the single-minded anti-communism of post-World War II foreign policy.

It was the belief that the Soviets were ten feet tall. That their armed forces would march across the world because they had incredible military superiority. That was an idea now exposed as a canard.

If anyone had or has military superiority, it is the United States. The Council on Foreign Relations estimates it would take China nearly two decades to catch up the United States militarily.

Indeed, the Council writes that "there is no evidence to support the notion that China will become a peer military competitor of the United States." Achieving military equality with the United States, the Council says, is not likely until 2030. Yet Romney writes as though the United States is a defenseless giant.

Contrasts

If the Obama foreign policy is the danger of a weak president who misunderstands the world, a modern Lord Aberdeen or Lyndon Johnson, then Romney's error will be likely to be the opposite.

Romney wants to emulate his heroes, Reagan and Truman. So he pushes for greater American commitment. He preaches the dangers of "isolationism," the once-popular American foreign policy. It is now either forgotten or scorned in mainstream media. It was the idea that the United States should stay out of the world's endless wars.

An actual difference

An essential part of the much maligned and misunderstood isolationist idea is that by pursuing peace and commerce, a nation sets an example for the rest of the world. So-called isolationists — I prefer the term "noninterventionists" — believe that force is right only in self-defense.

It is never justified through the arrogant idea of imposing our version of democracy on the rest of the world. It is never justified for a nation to then take over another nation and remake it in its own image, no matter how humane its goals are said to be. That constitutes a form of imperialism, even if it is done with the best of intentions.

Romney's Russian problem

Romney would project his imperial foreign policy around the globe. He believes the United States should be more vigilant in Eastern Europe; that it should invite more former Soviet republics into NATO, a sore point with the Russians going back 20 years.

Romney's stated aims probably foreclose any possibility of cordial relations with the Russians. He accuses the Russian prime minister of working relentlessly to hurt the United States. "Putin's moves have purpose beyond energy: anything that diminishes the America pleases him, both because it weakens a competing power and because it gratifies his personal animus for the United States."

Romney criticizes Obama for not installing missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. He also warns that nations such as North Korea and Iran could and would use nuclear blackmail against the United States.

He commends NATO nations that have sent forces to Afghanistan. Its initial decision "to engage in Afghanistan was a major accomplishment." But here he ignores reality.

Romney's NATO problem

NATO nations, especially the older ones such as Britain and France, have been cutting back their armed forces over the past twenty years. They are hesitant about following the United States into various wars around the globe. And their leaders know European voters generally don't want their troops sent on endless nation-building missions.

Romney's foreign-policy thinking is that if one wants peace, he must perpetually prepare to fight wars everywhere in the world. That idea, he believes, has been the basis of a benevolent Pax Americana since 1945. It is a misreading of history.

This almost 70-year period of faux peace has resulted in several wars in which the United States has been directly involved and dozens of other proxy wars, wars in which the United States had advised or supplied allies.

War is peace in the era of Barack and Mitt

To those foreign-policy critics who believe that the U.S. involvement in what seems to be every dispute in the world leads to war, Romney replies, "The opposite is true," he recently told the *Wall Street Journal*. "We are the true peacemakers."

Such comments, along with Obama's 2008 campaign promises of dramatic changes in how America's views and interacts with the world, are Orwellian. America has not been peacemaker. It has been a warmaker

A call for independence

H.L. Mencken once warned that the person who can think for himself is dangerous in a democracy. The maverick doesn't go along with the mob or the majority because he can reason. He will certainly be in the minority and probably always will be. He will see through the foreign-policy shibboleths of both major candidates, no matter how many tube ads they run and no matter how many times they swear that they believe in peace.

Neither Barack Obama nor Mitt Romney is likely to resist the use of military power to achieve American goals. In the process, the lives, property, liberty, and economic well-being of the American people, as well as people around the world, will continue to suffer.