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Perpetual War Is a Bigger Threat Than Terrorism

By Conor Friedersdorf

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Neither Barack Obama nor his Republican challengers have a strategy for victory and peace

In a scathing Memorial Day jeremiad against American foreign policy, Andrew Bacevich argues that elected officials are exploiting the troops by sending them to war when doing so isn't

necessary. His whole article is worth a read, but one passage is so striking that it merits special attention:

As the 10th anniversary of what Americans once called their Global War on Terror approaches, a plausible, realistic blueprint for bringing that enterprise to a conclusion does not exist.
Isn't that something? He's absolutely right. There isn't even the equivalent of Richard Nixon's secret plan to get us out of Vietnam. Or popular demand for one (the best efforts of my colleague notwithstanding).

As Professor Bacevich puts it:

Those who might once have felt some responsibility for articulating such a plan--the president, his chief lieutenants, senior military leaders--no longer feel any obligation to do so. As a practical matter, they devote themselves to war's perpetuation, closing one front while opening another. More strikingly still, we the people allow our leaders to evade this basic responsibility to articulate a plan for peace. By implication, we endorse the unspoken assumption that peace has become implausible.
Our thought process is as follows: terrorism is a threat, and it justifies waging war anywhere on earth where there are terrorists. As we all know, however, it's impossible to kill every last terrorist. Thus the war on terrorism rolls on. Even if we leave Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, it'll continue.

Give the hawks their due: terrorism *is* an ongoing threat to the United States. In fact, it's likely to pose a bigger threat with every year that passes, insofar as technological advances are permitting people with meager resources to obtain ever deadlier weapons. Heaven forbid they get a nuke or a killer virus. What the hawks fail to recognize, however, is that perpetual war poses a bigger threat to the citizenry of a superpower than does terrorism. Already it is helping to bankrupt us financially, undermining our civil liberties, corroding our values, triggering abusive prosecutions, empowering the executive branch in ways that are anathema to the system of checks and balances implemented by the Founders, and causing us to degrade one another.

Despite a decade without a major terrorist attack, the government continues to claim ever broader powers and to spend billions more in treasure. So what do things look like after another decade? Or after another major terrorist attack? Or when the Oval Office is occupied by someone who wields powers President Obama already claims in an even more abusive fashion?

All the metrics I mentioned are bound to get worse until Americans demand more than improved tactics, or an exit strategy in Iraq or Afghanistan, or the assurance that a leader will do what is necessary to keep us safe. Though terrorism will always threaten us -- as it always has -- the American people should demand an exit strategy in the war on terrorism, and an approach to safeguarding the homeland that isn't likely to bring about our fiscal ruin, the loss of our liberty, and the corrosion of our morals. Being far more powerful than our enemies, we pose the biggest threat to ourselves.