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Portrait of a Sagging Empire

By Tom Engelhardt

On August 17, 2010

In September 1998, I was handed a submission for a proposed book by Chalmers Johnson. I was then (as I am now) consulting editor at Metropolitan Books. 9/11 was three years away, the Bush administration still an unimaginable nightmare, and though the prospective book's prospective title had "American Empire" in it, the [American Empire Project](#) I now co-run with my friend and [TomDispatch regular](#) Steve Fraser was still almost four years from crossing either of our minds.

I remembered Johnson, however. As a young man, I had read his book on peasant nationalism in north China, where, during the 1930s, Japanese invaders were conducting "kill-all, burn-all, loot-all" operations. Its vision of how a revolution could gain strength from a foreign occupation stayed with me. I had undoubtedly also read some of Johnson's well-respected work on contemporary Japan and I knew, even then, that in the Vietnam War era he had been a fierce opponent of the antiwar movement I took part in. If I didn't already know it, the proposal made no bones about the fact that he had also, in that era, consulted for the CIA.

I certainly turned to his submission – a prologue, a single chapter, and an outline of the rest of a book – with a dubious eye, but was promptly blasted away by a passage in the prologue in which he referred to himself as having been a "spear-carrier for empire" and, some pages in, by this passage as well:

“I was sufficiently aware of Mao Zedong’s attempts to export ‘people’s war’ to believe that the United States could not afford to lose in Vietnam. In that, too, I was distinctly a man of my times. It proved to be a disastrously wrong position. The problem was that I knew too much about the international Communist movement and not enough about the United States government and its Department of Defense. I was also in those years irritated by campus antiwar protesters, who seemed to me self-indulgent as well as sanctimonious and who had so clearly not done their homework [on the history of communism in East Asia]. ... As it turned out, however, they understood far better than I did the impulses of a Robert McNamara, a McGeorge Bundy, or a Walt Rostow. They grasped something essential about the nature of America’s imperial role in the world that I had failed to perceive. In retrospect, I wish I had stood with the antiwar protest movement. For all its naïveté and unruliness, it was right and American policy wrong.”

I was little short of thunderstruck. I knew then – and I think it still holds today – that no one of prominence with Johnson’s position on the war and in his age range had ever written such a set of sentences. At that moment, knowing nothing else, I made the decision to publish his book. It was possibly the single most impulsive, even irrational, and thoroughly satisfying decision I’ve made in my 30-odd years as an editor in, or at the fringes of, mainstream publishing.

Though I didn’t have expectations for the book then, the rest is, quite literally, history. After all, its title would be *Blowback*, a term of CIA tradecraft that neither I nor just about any other American had ever heard of, and which, thanks to Johnson, has now become part of our language (along with the accompanying catch phrase “unintended consequences”). On its publication in 2000, the book was widely ignored. In the wake of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, however, it seemed nothing short of prophetic, and so, in paperback, stormed those 9/11 tables at the front of bookstores, and soared to bestsellerdom.

That I ever edited *Blowback* or Johnson’s subsequent books was little short of a fluke, one of the luckiest of my life. It led as well to a relationship with a man of remarkable empathy and insight, who was then on a no less remarkable journey (on which I could tag along). Now, a new book of his, [*Dismantling the Empire: America’s Last Best Hope*](#), has arrived, focused on the many subjects – from our empire of bases to the way the Pentagon budget, the weapons industries, and military Keynesianism may one day help send us into great power bankruptcy – that have obsessed him in recent years. It’s not to be missed. (Be sure to catch Timothy MacBain’s latest TomCast audio interview in which Johnson discusses that empire of bases and his new book by clicking [here](#) or, to download it to your iPod, [here](#).) Tom

The Guns of August

Lowering the flag on the American Century
by Chalmers Johnson

In 1962, the historian Barbara Tuchman published a book about the start of World War I and called it *The Guns of August*. It went on to win a Pulitzer Prize. She was, of course, looking back at events that had occurred almost 50 years earlier and had at her disposal documents and information not available to participants. They were acting, as Vietnam-era Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara put it, in the fog of war.

So where are we this August of 2010, with guns blazing in one war in Afghanistan even as we try to extricate ourselves from another in Iraq? Where are we, as we impose sanctions on Iran and North Korea (and threaten worse), while sending our latest wonder weapons, pilotless drones armed with bombs and missiles, into Pakistan's tribal borderlands, Yemen, and who knows where else, tasked with endless "targeted killings" which, in blunter times, used to be called assassinations? Where exactly are we, as we continue to garrison much of the globe even as our country finds itself incapable of paying for basic services?

I wish I had a crystal ball to peer into and see what historians will make of our own guns of August in 2060. The fog of war, after all, is just a stand-in for what might be called "the fog of the future," the inability of humans to peer with any accuracy far into the world to come. Let me nonetheless try to offer a few glimpses of what that foggy landscape some years ahead might reveal, and even hazard a few predictions about what possibilities await still-imperial America.

Let me begin by asking: What harm would befall the United States if we actually decided, against all odds, to close those hundreds and hundreds of bases, large and small, that we garrison around the world? What if we actually dismantled our empire, and came home? Would Genghis Khan-like hordes descend on us? Not likely. Neither a land nor a sea invasion of the U.S. is even conceivable.

Would 9/11-type attacks accelerate? It seems far likelier to me that, as our overseas profile shrank, the possibility of such attacks would shrink with it.

Would various countries we've invaded, sometimes occupied, and tried to set on the path of righteousness and democracy decline into "failed states"? Probably some would, and preventing or controlling this should be the function of the United Nations or of neighboring states. (It is well to remember that the murderous Cambodian regime of Pol Pot was finally brought to an end not by us, but by neighboring Vietnam.)

Sagging Empire

In other words, the main fears you might hear in Washington – if anyone even bothered to wonder what would happen, should we begin to dismantle our empire – would prove but chimeras. They would, in fact, be remarkably similar to Washington's dire predictions in the 1970s about states all over Asia, then Africa, and beyond falling, like so many dominoes, to communist domination if we did not win the war in Vietnam.

What, then, would the world be like if the U.S. lost control globally – Washington’s greatest fear and deepest reflection of its own overblown sense of self-worth – as is in fact happening now despite our best efforts? What would that world be like if the U.S. just gave it all up? What would happen to us if we were no longer the “sole superpower” or the world’s self-appointed policeman?

In fact, we would still be a large and powerful nation-state with a host of internal and external problems. An immigration and drug crisis on our southern border, soaring health-care costs, a weakening education system, an aging population, an aging infrastructure, an unending recession – none of these are likely to go away soon, nor are any of them likely to be tackled in a serious or successful way as long as we continue to spend our wealth on armies, weapons, wars, global garrisons, and bribes for petty dictators.

Even without our interference, the Middle East would continue to export oil, and if China has been buying up an ever larger share of what remains underground in those lands, perhaps that should spur us into conserving more and moving more rapidly into the field of alternative energies.

Rising Power

Meanwhile, whether we dismantle our empire or not, China will become (if it isn’t already) the world’s next superpower. It, too, faces a host of internal problems, including many of the same ones we have. However, it has a booming economy, a favorable balance of payments vis-à-vis much of the rest of the world (particularly the U.S., which is currently running an annual trade deficit with China of \$227 billion), and a government and population determined to develop the country into a powerful, economically dominant nation-state.

Fifty years ago, when I began my academic career as a scholar of China and Japan, I was fascinated by the modern history of both countries. My first book dealt with the way the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s spurred Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party he headed on a trajectory to power, thanks to its nationalist resistance to that foreign invader. Incidentally, it is not difficult to find many examples of this process in which a domestic political group gains power because it champions resistance to foreign troops. In the immediate post-WWII period, it occurred in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia; with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, all over Eastern Europe; and today, it is surely occurring in Afghanistan and probably in Iraq as well.

Once the Cultural Revolution began in China in 1966, I temporarily lost interest in studying the country. I thought I knew where that disastrous internal upheaval was taking China and so turned back to Japan, which by then was well launched on its amazing recovery from World War II, thanks to state-guided, but not state-owned, economic growth.

This pattern of economic development, sometimes called the “developmental state,” differed fundamentally from both Soviet-type control of the economy and the laissez-faire approach of the U.S. Despite Japan’s success, by the 1990s its increasingly sclerotic bureaucracy had led the country into a prolonged period of deflation and stagnation. Meanwhile, post-U.S.S.R. Russia, briefly in thrall to U.S. economic advice, fell captive to rapacious oligarchs who dismantled the command economy only to enrich themselves.

In China, Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping and his successors were able to watch developments in Japan and Russia, learning from them both. They have clearly adopted effective aspects of both systems for their economy and society. With a modicum of luck, economic and otherwise, and a continuation of its present well-informed, rational leadership, China should continue to prosper without either threatening its neighbors or the United States.

To imagine that China might want to start a war with the U.S. – even over an issue as deeply emotional as the ultimate political status of Taiwan – would mean projecting a very different path for that country than the one it is currently embarked on.

Lowering the Flag on the American Century

Thirty-five years from now, America’s official century of being top dog (1945-2045) will have come to an end; its time may, in fact, be running out right now. We are likely to begin to look ever more like a giant version of England at the end of its imperial run, as we come face-to-face with, if not necessarily to terms with, our aging infrastructure, declining international clout, and sagging economy. It may, for all we know, still be Hollywood’s century decades from now, and so we may still make waves on the cultural scene, just as Britain did in the 1960s with the Beatles and Twiggy. Tourists will undoubtedly still visit some of our natural wonders and perhaps a few of our less scruffy cities, partly because the dollar-exchange rate is likely to be in their favor.

If, however, we were to dismantle our empire of military bases and redirect our economy toward productive, instead of destructive, industries; if we maintained our volunteer armed forces primarily to defend our own shores (and perhaps to be used at the behest of the United Nations); if we began to invest in our infrastructure, education, health care, and savings, then we might have a chance to reinvent ourselves as a productive, normal nation. Unfortunately, I don’t see that happening. Peering into that foggy future, I simply can’t imagine the U.S. dismantling its empire voluntarily, which doesn’t mean that, like all sets of imperial garrisons, our bases won’t go someday.

Instead, I foresee the U.S. drifting along, much as the Obama administration seems to be drifting along in the war in Afghanistan. The common talk among economists today is that high unemployment may linger for another decade. Add in low investment and depressed spending (except perhaps by the government) and I fear T.S. Eliot had it right when he wrote: “This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper.”

I have always been a political analyst rather than an activist. That is one reason why I briefly became a consultant to the CIA's top analytical branch, and why I now favor disbanding the Agency. Not only has the CIA lost its *raison d'être* by allowing its intelligence gathering to become politically tainted, but its clandestine operations have created a climate of impunity in which the U.S. can assassinate, torture, and imprison people at will worldwide.

Just as I lost interest in China when that country's leadership headed so blindly down the wrong path during the Cultural Revolution, so I'm afraid I'm losing interest in continuing to analyze and dissect the prospects for the U.S. over the next few years. I applaud the efforts of young journalists to tell it like it is, and of scholars to assemble the data that will one day enable historians to describe where and when we went astray. I especially admire insights from the inside, such as those of ex-military men like Andrew Bacevich and Chuck Spinney. And I am filled with awe by men and women who are willing to risk their careers, incomes, freedom, and even lives to protest – such as the priests and nuns of SOA Watch, who regularly picket the School of the Americas and call attention to the presence of American military bases and misbehavior in South America.

I'm impressed as well with Pfc. Bradley Manning, if he is indeed the person responsible for potentially making public 92,000 secret documents about the war in Afghanistan. Daniel Ellsberg has long been calling for someone to do what he himself did when he released the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War. He must be surprised that his call has now been answered – and in such an unlikely way.

My own role these past 20 years has been that of Cassandra, whom the gods gave the gift of foreseeing the future, but also cursed because no one believed her. I wish I could be more optimistic about what's in store for the U.S. Instead, there isn't a day that our own guns of August don't continue to haunt me.