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A decade after the 9/11 attacks, Americans live in an era of endless war

By Greg Jaffe

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This is the American era of endless war.

To grasp its sweep, it helps to visit Fort Campbell, Ky., where the Army will soon open a $31 million complex for wounded troops and those whose bodies are breaking down after a decade of deployments.

The Warrior Transition Battalion complex boasts the only four-story structure on the base, which at 105,000 acres is more than twice the size of Washington, D.C. The imposing brick-and-glass building towers over architecture from earlier wars.

“This unit will be around as long as the Army is around,” said Lt. Col. Bill Howard, the battalion commander.

As the new complex rises, bulldozers are taking down the last of Fort Campbell’s World War II-era buildings. The white clapboard structures were hastily thrown up in the early 1940s as the country girded to battle Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. Each was labeled with a large letter “T.” The buildings, like the war the country was entering, were supposed to be temporary.

The two sets of buildings tell the story of America's embrace of endless war in the 10 years since Sept. 11, 2001. In previous decades, the military and the American public viewed war as an aberration and peace as the norm.

Today, radical religious ideologies, new technologies and cheap, powerful weapons have catapulted the world into "a period of persistent conflict," according to the Pentagon's last major assessment of global security. "No one should harbor the illusion that the developed world can win this conflict in the near future," the document concludes.

By this logic, America's wars are unending and any talk of peace is quixotic or naive. The new view of war and peace has brought about far-reaching changes in agencies such as the CIA, which is increasingly shifting its focus from gathering intelligence to targeting and killing terrorists. Within the military the shift has reshaped Army bases, spurred the creation of new commands and changed what it means to be a warrior.

On the home front, the new thinking has altered long-held views about the effectiveness of military power and the likelihood that peace will ever prevail.

In the decades after Vietnam, the U.S. military was almost entirely focused on training for a big, unthinkable war with the Soviet Union. There were small conflicts, such as Grenada, Panama and the Persian Gulf War, but the United States was largely at peace.

After the Soviet collapse and America's swift Gulf War victory, the military bet that it would be able to use big weapons and vastly better technology to bludgeon enemies into a speedy surrender. It envisioned a future of quick, decisive and overwhelming victories.

A decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan has crushed the "smug certainties" of that earlier era, said Eliot Cohen, a military historian who served in the George W. Bush administration.

When war is 'normal'

Most soldiers and Marines in today's military have seen their entire careers consumed by combat. During last year's 9/11 anniversary, Lt. Col. Christopher M. Coglianese accompanied his second-grade daughter on her school's annual Freedom Walk outside Fort Hood, Tex.

"Basically the whole student body walks around the grounds of the school wearing patriotic garb and carrying signs about freedom," Coglianese recalled in an e-mail from Iraq, where he is on his third tour.

The children in his daughter's Skipcha Elementary School class proudly told him how many times their fathers had deployed and where they had fought.

"To be honest there was a certain surrealism about it," Coglianese wrote. "For this very small slice of American children this way of life is completely normal."

Coglianese believes the separations have forced military children to develop "a strength, maturity and resilience well beyond their years."

The long stretch of war has also isolated the U.S. military from society. Senior Army officials worry that career soldiers have forgotten how to take care of their troops outside the war zones. A 2010 Army study partially blamed the service's unusually high suicide rate on the "lost art of leadership in garrison."

Other top military officials fret that the troops are developing a troubling sense that they are better than the society they serve.

"Today's Army, including its leadership, lives in a bubble separate from society," wrote retired Lt. Gen. David Barno, who commanded U.S. forces in Afghanistan, in an essay for the Web site of Foreign Policy magazine. "This splendid military isolation — set in the midst of a largely adoring nation — risks fostering a closed culture of superiority and aloofness. This must change if the Army is to remain in, of, and with the ever-diverse peoples of the United States."

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have not had the broad cultural impact of previous conflicts such as World War II or Vietnam. The new wars have not produced war bonds, internment camps, victory gardens or large-scale counterculture protests. Movies about these fights have largely flopped.

The endless conflict, however, has triggered major changes in the way Americans view war and peace. Call of Duty, a series of video games, offers up a fun-house-mirror reflection of this new understanding of conflict. Each year more than 30 million people play the game, according to its manufacturer, Activision Blizzard.

Early versions of the game were set in World War II and largely paralleled real-world events. As American troops hurtled toward Baghdad in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein, Call of Duty players controlled virtual soldiers fighting to liberate European cities from a fascist dictator.

The popularity of the series truly soared in 2009 with the launch of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, which portrayed a very different kind of war.

Modern Warfare 2 begins in Afghanistan, where U.S. troops are locked in a long, bloody struggle with the Taliban.

"We are the most powerful force in the history of the world," an American general bellows at his soldiers. "Every fight is our fight."

From there the game veers into the sensational. A terrorist attack at a Russian airport triggers a global war between the United States and Russian ultranationalists. Game players battle Russian soldiers in the Washington suburbs and fire missiles from Predator drones. In a Russian airport scene, the players are made to take part in a slaughter of innocent civilians, who crawl across blood-streaked floors and beg for their lives.

In the World War II games, the players are unquestionably good and the war's ends are noble. The games end in victory and peace. The allies raise a victory banner over the Reichstag building in Berlin.

In the Modern Warfare battles, the conflicts are unending.

"You find yourself doubting why we fight," said Lee Brimmicombe-Wood, an industry veteran and game designer. "Villains are killed, but you are left in the end with a completely devastated world." Victory is unattainable.

Peace, of course, is not just absent from video games. It has faded from any debate in Washington surrounding the wars.

Beyond Iraq and Afghanistan

New Pentagon organizations set up for Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to persist indefinitely to deal with the era's enduring threats. In 2006, the Defense Department created the Joint IED Defeat Organization to help in the battle with improvised explosive devices, which remain the top killer of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The command has requested $2.8 billion next year. Senior Pentagon officials said there are no plans to scale back its funding.

"Outside of Iraq and Afghanistan, there are 500 IED events each month," said Lt. Gen. Michael Barbero, who commands the organization.

In June and July, IEDs exploded in Pakistan, India, Somalia, Yemen, Colombia, Nigeria and Norway. These days, terrorist and insurgent groups strike with increasingly sophisticated IEDs. Rich nations fight back with drones, intelligence analysts and special operations forces.

"I tell people we are in an arms race with the enemy," Barbero said.

"Peace," meanwhile, has become something of a dirty word in Washington foreign-policy circles. Earlier this year, the House voted to cut all funding for the congressionally funded U.S. Institute of Peace.

Although the money was eventually restored, the institute's leadership remains convinced that the word "peace" in its name was partially to blame for its woes. The word is too abstract and academic, said Richard Solomon, the institute's president.

Solomon suggested one alternative: the U.S. Institute for Conflict Management.

The institute has staffers working in war zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia.

"Peace doesn't reflect the world we are dealing with," he said.

In June, when President Obama laid out his plans to begin reducing the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, he sought to assure a weary American public that the country's longest war was drawing to an end.

"Tonight we take comfort in knowing that the tide of war is receding," he said. "And even as there will be dark days ahead in Afghanistan, the light of a secure peace can be seen in the distance."

Obama was not promising an end to America's wars. He was suggesting that the United States needed to find new, more cost-effective ways of fighting them that do not involve tens of thousands of American soldiers and Marines patrolling in Iraqi and Afghan villages.

Even as the Obama administration has started to cut troop numbers in Afghanistan, it has ramped up drone strikes and the use of special operations forces in places such as Yemen and Somalia . Going forward, the administration will rely heavily on the military's secretive Joint Special Operations Command, which has grown tenfold in the past decade.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Americans were willing to bear almost any price for their security. One lesson of today's endless war seems to be that Americans will have to learn to live with a certain amount of insecurity and fear.

"In this world we will not 'win wars,'" Anne-Marie Slaughter, a former Obama administration official, wrote in the British foreign-policy journal RUSI. "We will have an assortment of civilian and military tools to increase our chances of turning looming bad outcomes into good — or at least better — outcomes."

On Friday, the children at Skipcha Elementary outside Fort Hood will take part in another Freedom Walk celebration to commemorate the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

The students have begun decorating posters to illustrate this year's theme: "What freedom means to me."

Coglianese, who has five children at the school, will miss the event because he is finishing a 12-month stint training Iraqi army forces north of Baghdad.

"This tour has been hard psychologically," he wrote in an e-mail. "Violence where I am at is at nuisance level compared to Baghdad in 2006-2007. But the separation is more acute for [my children] and for me. . . . I have no regrets. Service is supposed to be tough, and in many ways it is."

His wife has promised to snap pictures of their children.