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Deafening Silence: Why Our Ongoing Wars Are Not a Campaign Issue

Jonathan Weiler

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With the midterm elections now days away, one would think that the fact that the United States remains embroiled in two major overseas conflicts -- [one perhaps our longest ever war](#) and the other [our most costly and bloody since Vietnam](#) -- would be a major campaign issue.

But despite all the acrimony about so many other matters, great and small, there's been very little in the way of campaign energy devoted to our wars. This is an unfortunate fact, especially in an era of belt-tightening and austerity. Unemployed workers are losing benefits in large numbers; tens of millions of Americans remain uninsured against major medical loss; states and localities are [cutting back on basic services while much of our infrastructure crumbles apace](#) and the economy remains mired in a tailspin the likes of which we've not experienced in decades. And in the midst of those depressing and grinding realities, our war machine, whose price tag this year is in the neighborhood of \$700 billion, hums merrily along (a proper accounting of Pentagon spending [puts the price tag at perhaps a trillion dollars](#). Per year).

Why is that? Why are we paying so little attention to such a significant issue?

In his fine [op-ed piece in the New York Times](#) ten days ago, Tom Brokaw offered one explanation -- that Americans are preoccupied with the economy and our all-volunteer

army means that the immediate consequences of war now touch a small minority of American families. This makes it an easy issue to ignore.

But there is a longer term factor, a creepy bipartisanship in an era characterized by partisan rancor, that is conspiring to keep this most important of issues off the campaign trail. This is the victory of what Andrew Bacevich has called the American Credo, as described in his new book, [Washington Rules](#). This Credo, Bacevich writes, "summons the United States -- and the United States alone -- to lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world." And to fulfill that credo, the United States must maintain "military capabilities staggeringly in excess of those required for self-defense." These means of credo fulfillment rest on a "holy trinity," as Bacevich puts it, of global military presence (Chalmers Johnson's phrase is an "empire of bases"), capable of global power projection and ready at all times to engage in global interventionism.

The American Credo and attendant posture is, of course, not new. It has been accepted by every sitting American president from Truman to Obama. But given the dire straits in which we now find ourselves, on battlefields around the globe and on the home front, it has perhaps never been more urgent that we subject this credo to scrutiny.

It seemed for a while, between roughly 2002-2008, that there was an opening in the political system for contesting our aggressive, forward military posture (as there had been, briefly, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam disaster). Though almost no notable voices contested the Bush administration's prerogative to attack Afghanistan in 2001, some political fissures opened up in 2002 as the administration began beating the drums for war against Iraq. In a hyper-patriotic climate, when challenging the president was deemed by many to be tantamount to treason, 21 Democrats (plus an independent and a Republican) in the Senate managed to vote against the authorization to use force against Iraq, just before the 2002 mid-term elections.

As easy military victory against Saddam turned into a bloody counterinsurgency and civil war in 2003-04, that opposition became louder. Howard Dean, for a time the front-runner for the Democratic nomination in '04, repeatedly denounced Bush's war in Iraq. By 2006, with the war now broadly unpopular, Democrats were emboldened in denouncing the adventure in Iraq. Ned Lamont, carrying the anti-war banner against Joe Lieberman, won a shocking primary victory in August 2006 against the 18-year Connecticut Senate incumbent (though, of course, he lost the general election when Lieberman ran as an independent). The 2006 Congressional take-over by Democrats was fueled, in significant part, by public dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was canned by the White House immediately following the election debacle.

Barack Obama emerged as a surprise front-runner for the Democratic nomination in 2008 by touting his opposition to the Iraq fiasco and contrasting his judgment and prescience with that of Hilary Clinton, whose 2002 vote in favor of the Iraq resolution was now a serious liability.

But this was mainly politics and never reached nearly the level of discussion and debate that the deep roots of the credo and its consequences for America's economic well-being and national security merits. Already during the 2008 general campaign, Obama made quite clear [that he had no intention of challenging any of the deep-seated foundations of American militarism](#) that have built up over decades. What opposition he continued to voice to some of the practices of the global war on terror -- indefinite detention, Gitmo, etc -- was dispensed with once he became president.

The GOP of today is certainly not going to question maximum militarization and the Democratic Party, despite a history of tolerating some notable anti-war elements, [is just as certainly not going to stake its political fortunes](#) on defying the long-standing consensus concerning America's global military prerogatives. So, despite all the screaming and wailing from the right about how Obama threatens America, an unnerving bipartisan consensus on the key precepts of American militarism has, in 2010, fully re-asserted itself. And for all of those who wish that we had more bipartisanship than we currently do, it's worth considering what bipartisan consensus means in this case. Our war machine is responsible for [significant blowback](#), imperiling our national security; a financial burden that is crippling in the current circumstances; tens of thousands of American lives ended, or broken beyond repair, with all the attendant consequences for the families involved; and the ongoing erosion of our civil liberties, all justified in the name of defending our freedom via global militarism.

Much as it's said that the devil's greatest trick was convincing people that he didn't exist, the American Credo's greatest ally has been the full re-assertion of bipartisan consensus on militarism, making the issue virtually invisible in this campaign despite the fact that it's never been more urgent for us to face squarely its scope and consequences.