

By Nick Turse

From [Tom's Dispatch](#) | Original Article

They looked like a gang of geriatric giants. Clad in smart casual attire -- dress shirts, sweaters, and jeans -- and incongruous blue hospital booties, they strode around “the world,” stopping to stroke their chins and ponder this or that potential crisis. Among them was General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a button-down shirt and jeans, without a medal or a ribbon in sight, his arms crossed, his gaze fixed. He had one foot [planted](#) firmly in Russia, the other partly in Kazakhstan, and yet the general hadn’t left the friendly confines of Virginia.

Several times this year, Dempsey, the other joint chiefs, and regional war-fighting commanders have assembled at the Marine Corps Base in Quantico to [conduct](#) a futuristic war-game-meets-academic-seminar about the needs of the military in 2017. There, a giant map of the world, larger than a basketball court, was laid out so the Pentagon’s top brass could shuffle around the planet -- provided they wore those scuff-preventing shoe covers -- as they thought about “potential U.S. national military vulnerabilities in future conflicts” (so one participant told the *New York Times*)

. The sight of those generals with the world underfoot was a fitting image for Washington’s military ambitions, its penchant for foreign interventions, and its contempt for (non-U.S.) borders and national sovereignty.

A World So Much Larger Than a Basketball Court

In recent weeks, some of the possible fruits of Dempsey’s “strategic seminars,” military missions far from the confines of Quantico, have repeatedly popped up in the news. Sometimes buried in a story, sometimes as the headline, the reports attest to the Pentagon’s penchant for globetrotting.

In September, for example, Lieutenant General Robert L. Caslen, Jr., [revealed](#) that, just

months after the U.S. military withdrew from Iraq, a unit of Special Operations Forces had already been redeployed there in an advisory role and that negotiations were underway to arrange for larger numbers of troops to train Iraqi forces in the future. That same month, the Obama administration won congressional approval to divert funds earmarked for counterterrorism aid for Pakistan to a new proxy project in Libya. According to the *New York Times*

, U.S. Special Operations Forces will likely be [deployed](#)

to create and train a 500-man Libyan commando unit to battle Islamic militant groups which have become increasingly powerful as a result of the 2011 U.S.-aided revolution there.

Earlier this month, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the U.S. military had secretly sent a new task force to Jordan to assist local troops in responding to the civil war in neighboring Syria. Only days later, that paper [revealed](#) that recent U.S. efforts to train and assist surrogate forces for Honduras's drug war were already crumbling amid a spiral of questions about the deaths of innocents, violations of international law, and suspected human rights abuses by Honduran allies.

Shortly after that, the *Times* [reported](#) the bleak, if [hardly surprising](#), news that the proxy army the U.S. has spent more than a decade building in Afghanistan is, according to officials, "so plagued with desertions and low re-enlistment rates that it has to replace a third of its entire force every year." Rumors now regularly bubble up about a possible U.S.-funded

[proxy war](#)

on the horizon in

[Northern Mali](#)

where al-Qaeda-linked Islamists have taken over vast stretches of territory -- yet another direct

[result](#)

of last year's intervention in Libya.

And these were just the offshore efforts that made it into the news. Many other U.S. military actions abroad remain largely below the radar. Several weeks ago, for instance, U.S. personnel were quietly deployed to Burundi to carry out training efforts in that small, landlocked, desperately poor East African nation. Another contingent of U.S. Army and Air Force trainers headed to the similarly landlocked and poor West African nation of Burkina Faso to instruct indigenous forces.

At Camp Arifjan, an American base in Kuwait, U.S. and local troops donned gas masks and protective suits to conduct joint chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear training. In

Guatemala, 200 Marines from Detachment Martillo completed a months-long deployment to assist indigenous naval forces and law enforcement agencies in drug interdiction efforts.

Across the globe, in the forbidding tropical forests of the Philippines, Marines joined elite Filipino troops to train for combat operations in jungle environments and to help enhance their skills as snipers. Marines from both nations also leapt from airplanes, 10,000 feet above the island archipelago, in an effort to further the “interoperability” of their forces. Meanwhile, in the Southeast Asian nation of Timor-Leste, Marines trained embassy guards and military police in crippling “compliance techniques” like pain holds and pressure point manipulation, as well as soldiers in jungle warfare as part of Exercise Crocodilo 2012.

The idea behind Dempsey’s “strategic seminars” was to plan for the future, to figure out how to properly respond to developments in far-flung corners of the globe. And in the real world, U.S. forces are regularly putting preemptive pins in that giant map -- from Africa to Asia, Latin America to the Middle East. On the surface, global engagement, training missions, and joint operations appear rational enough. And Dempsey’s big picture planning seems like a sensible way to think through solutions to future national security threats.

But when you consider how the Pentagon really operates, such war-gaming undoubtedly has an absurdist quality to it. After all, global threats turn out to come in every size imaginable, from fringe Islamic movements in Africa to Mexican drug gangs. How exactly they truly threaten U.S. “national security” is often unclear -- beyond some White House adviser’s or general’s say-so. And whatever alternatives come up in such Quantico seminars, the “sensible” response invariably turns out to be sending in the Marines, or the SEALs, or the drones, or some local proxies. In truth, there is no need to spend a day shuffling around a giant map in blue booties to figure it all out.

In one way or another, the U.S. military is now [involved](#) with most of the nations on Earth. Its soldiers, commandos, trainers, base builders, drone jockeys, spies, and arms dealers, as well as associated hired guns and corporate contractors, can now be found just about everywhere on the planet. The sun never sets on American troops conducting operations, training allies, arming surrogates, schooling its own personnel, purchasing new weapons and equipment, developing fresh doctrine, implementing novel tactics, and refining their martial arts. The U.S. has submarines trolling the briny deep and aircraft carrier task forces traversing the oceans and seas, robotic drones flying constant missions and manned aircraft patrolling the skies, while above them, spy satellites circle, peering down on friend and foe alike.

Since 2001, the U.S. military has thrown everything in its arsenal, short of nuclear weapons, including untold billions of dollars in weaponry, technology, bribes, you name it, at a remarkably weak set of enemies -- relatively small groups of poorly-armed fighters in impoverished nations like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen -- while decisively defeating none of them. With its deep pockets and long reach, its technology and training acumen, as well as the devastatingly destructive power at its command, the U.S. military should have the planet on lockdown. It should, by all rights, dominate the world just as the neoconservative dreamers of the early Bush years assumed it would.

Yet after more than a decade of war, it has failed to eliminate a rag-tag Afghan insurgency with limited popular support. It trained an indigenous Afghan force that was long known for its poor performance -- before it became better known for killing its American trainers. It has spent years and untold tens of millions of tax dollars chasing down assorted firebrand clerics, various terrorist "lieutenants," and a host of no-name militants belonging to al-Qaeda, mostly in the backlands of the planet. Instead of wiping out that organization and its wannabes, however, it seems mainly to have facilitated its franchising around the world.

At the same time, it has managed to paint weak regional forces like Somalia's al-Shabaab as transnational threats, then focus its resources on eradicating them, only to fail at the task. It has thrown millions of dollars in personnel, equipment, aid, and recently even troops into the task of eradicating low-level drug runners (as well as the major drug cartels), without putting a [dent](#) in the northward flow of narcotics to America's cities and suburbs.

It spends billions on intelligence only to routinely find itself in the dark. It destroyed the regime of an Iraqi dictator and occupied his country, only to be fought to a standstill by ill-armed, ill-organized insurgencies there, then out-maneuvered by the allies it had helped put in power, and unceremoniously bounced from the country (even if it is now beginning to claw its way back in). It spends untold millions of dollars to train and equip elite Navy SEALs to take on poor, untrained, lightly-armed adversaries, like gun-toting Somali pirates.

How Not to Change in a Changing World

And that isn't the half of it.

The U.S. military devours money and yet delivers little in the way of victories. Its personnel may be among the most talented and well-trained on the planet, its weapons and technology the most sophisticated and advanced around. And when it comes to defense budgets, it far [outspends](#)

the next nine largest nations combined (most of which are allies in any case), let alone its enemies like the Taliban, al-Shabaab, or al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, but in the real world of warfare this turns out to add up to remarkably little.

In a government filled with agencies routinely derided for profligacy, inefficiency, and producing poor outcomes, its [record](#) may be unmatched in terms of waste and abject [failure](#), though that seems to faze almost no one in Washington. For more than a decade, the U.S. military has bounced from one failed doctrine to the next. There was Donald Rumsfeld's "military lite," followed by what could have been called military heavy (though it never got a name), which was superseded by General David Petraeus's "counterinsurgency operations" (also known by its acronym COIN). This, in turn, has been succeeded by the Obama administration's bid for future military triumph: a "light footprint"

[combination](#) of special ops, drones, spies, civilian soldiers, cyberwarfare, and proxy fighters. Yet whatever the method employed, one thing has been constant: successes have been fleeting, setbacks many, frustrations the name of the game, and victory MIA.

Convinced nonetheless that finding just the [right formula](#) for applying force globally is the key to success, the U.S. military is presently banking on that new six-point plan. Tomorrow, it may turn to a different war-lite mix. Somewhere down the road, it will undoubtedly again experiment with something heavier. And if history is any guide, counterinsurgency, a concept that failed the U.S. in Vietnam and was resuscitated only to fail again in Afghanistan, will one day be back in vogue.

In all of this, it should be obvious, a learning curve is lacking. Any solution to America's war-fighting problems will undoubtedly require the sort of fundamental reevaluation of warfare and military might that no one in Washington is open to at the moment. It's going to take more than a few days spent shuffling around a big map in plastic shoe covers.

American politicians never tire of extolling the virtues of the U.S. military, which is now commonly [hailed](#) as "the finest fighting force in the history of the world." This claim appears grotesquely at odds with reality. Aside from triumphs over such non-powers as the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada and the small Central American nation of Panama, the U.S. military's record since World War II has been a [litany](#) of disappointments:

stalemate in Korea, outright defeat in Vietnam, failures in Laos and Cambodia, debacles in Lebanon and Somalia, two wars against Iraq (both ending without victory), more than a decade of wheel-spinning in Afghanistan, and so on.

Something akin to the law of diminishing returns may be at work. The more time, effort, and treasure the U.S. invests in its military and its military adventures, the weaker the payback. In this context, the impressive destructive power of that military may not matter a bit, if it is tasked with doing things that military might, as it has been traditionally conceived, can perhaps no longer do.

Success may not be possible, whatever the circumstances, in the twenty-first-century world, and victory not even an option. Instead of trying yet again to find exactly the right formula or even reinventing warfare, perhaps the U.S. military needs to reinvent itself and its *raison d'être* if it's ever to break out of its long cycle of failure.

But don't count on it.

Instead, expect the politicians to continue to heap on the praise, Congress to continue insuring funding at levels that stagger the imagination, presidents to continue applying blunt force to complex geopolitical problems (even if in slightly different ways), arms dealers to continue churning out wonder weapons that prove less than wondrous, and the Pentagon continuing to fail to win.

Coming off the latest series of failures, the U.S. military has leapt headlong into yet another transitional period -- call it the changing face of empire -- but don't expect a change in weapons, tactics, strategy, or even doctrine to yield a change in results. As the adage goes: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Nick Turse is the managing editor of TomDispatch.com and a fellow at the Nation Institute. An award-winning journalist, his work has appeared in the [Los Angeles Times](#), [the Nation](#), and [regularly](#)

at [TomDispatch](http://TomDispatch.com).

He is the author/editor of several books, including the just published

[The Changing Face of Empire: Special Ops, Drones, Spies, Proxy Fighters, Secret Bases, and Cyberwarfare](#)

(Haymarket Books). *This piece is the final article in his*

[series](#)

on the changing face of American empire, which is being underwritten by Lannan Foundation

. You can follow him on

[Tumblr](#)

.