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*U.S. Marines patrol street in Shah Karez in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Staff Sgt. Robert Storm)*

Last October marked the 16th anniversary of our unending war – or military occupation – in Afghanistan, the longest conflict on foreign soil in U.S. history. The cost to human lives in our current cycle of [U.S.-initiated “perpetual wars”](#) throughout the Middle East and Africa is unthinkably high. It runs well into millions of deaths if one counts – as do the Nuremberg principles of international law – victims of spinoff fighting and sectarian violence that erupt after we destroy governance structures.

Also to be counted are other forms of human loss, suffering, illness and early mortality that result from national sanctions, destruction of physical, social and medical infrastructure, loss of homeland, refugee flight, ethnic cleansing, and their psychological after-effects. One has to witness these to grasp their extent in trauma, and they all arise from the Nuremberg-defined

“supreme crime” of initiating war. Waging aggressive war is something America is practiced in and does well, with justifications like “fighting terrorism,” “securing our interests,” “protecting innocents,” “spreading democracy,” etc. – as has every aggressor in history that felt the need to explain its aggressions.

Yet few gathered across the country in October, much less gave a thought of lament to the harm we are doing. It’s a topic we’d like to forget. Recalling that domestic opposition to the Vietnam War grew exponentially over the similar (but far shorter) timespan of that aggression, one might wonder what has changed. A numbed, distracted America has reached the point where bellicose presidential threats to destroy North Korea with its puny nuclear arsenal, and cancel the agreement keeping Iran from developing one, barely elicit shrugs among us.

One explanation for our current apathy is that our Military Industrial Complex (President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s term for the institutionalized promoter-beneficiaries of warfare) has long since developed means to effectively counter any collective war-weariness. Vietnam-era MIC apologists publicly worried that “[sickly inhibitions against the use of military force](#)” would jeopardize American “interests” around the globe. In time-honored fashion they cast “[back-stabbing” blame for the “Vietnam Syndrome](#)” on war-opposing figures of the time like Daniel Ellsberg, Jane Fonda, Dr. Benjamin Spock, even Walter Cronkite, and the millions of so-called “me-generation” draft-resisters who they said caused the “loss” of Vietnam.

Does Vietnam look “lost” to America today? Hardly. What was lost in Vietnam were millions of its own people, a countryside devastated by saturation bombing and the eco-poison Agent Orange, whose toxicity still devastates people there, and the still-present effects of that war.

Lest we forget, it was visited upon them in our name, at our hands, by our leaders and the profit-making military-industrial backers we tolerate. Add the millions of deaths and utter destruction of Cambodia, along with Laos, and we arrive at a massive, prolonged Holocaust-level crime perpetrated by our country, which also suffered – although not nearly at the same rate.

Along with 58,000 official American lives lost, plus hundreds of thousands of physically and many more emotionally damaged veterans, we as a society lost whatever post-World War II moral standing we thought we enjoyed. However we may try to fool ourselves, we all know this inside.

The MIC managers' answer to our Vietnam unease was brilliantly synergistic, and has made the subsequent costs of war largely invisible to us. [First, they quickly eliminated the draft](#) , fine-tuning Vietnam-era social engineering via temporary college-deferments – which had reduced but did not eliminate military service burden-sharing among the better-off – into no burden at all for that class.

In its stead they created a “professional” army whose ranks are manned by “volunteers” from the ever-growing pool of de-industrialized America’s less-advantaged – joined more recently by immigrants seeking US citizenship. The British imperialistic model of employing “surplus” populations as enforcers of global military dominance was thus reborn here. Our “poverty draft” does not elicit much concern among well-off conservatives and liberals as long as token soldiers get honored in commercials, sporting events and holidays.

Our remarkably swift transition from “boots on the ground” to overwhelming reliance on aerial bombing, drone, mercenary, and surrogate (including US-supported Al Qaeda and ISIS proxy) warfare under Obama completed the domestic pain-relieving process of engaging globally in the “foreign entanglements” our first president warned us against. The lopsided asymmetry of this kind of war-making is such that our casualties have become a tiny fraction of a percent of the totals. American war deaths have dropped to levels so infinitesimally low that government lawyers can claim with a straight face (arguing against the need for congressional war authorization) that US-NATO’s aggressive [bombing campaigns do not even constitute “war” anymore](#)

Nor has our government raised taxes to cover war costs (something our [Founding Fathers assumed](#) would provide inherent constraints and help make war unpopular). Rather, it has put war costs, already conservatively [estimated to be \\$5.6 trillion](#) since 9/11, onto the [ever-expanding national debt](#) ceiling, which [“like a speed limit sign that is never enforced” now stands at over \\$20 trillion](#) , with no end in sight. This level of debt would normally and will eventually – particularly combined with our unending trade deficit – reduce the buying power of the dollar and raise prices for everything we import. It has not yet done so because the dollar’s status as the surrogate world trade currency is propped up by U.S. hard and soft power.

This is the poison icing on the cake of the MIC's maintenance of war: our abundance of cheap world goods depends on it. On a level we fear to examine, our livelihoods are complicit in the ongoing wars being waged in our name.

Unsurprisingly, we tend not to concern ourselves with our government's harming of distant others when we do not see it. If those harmed are effectively demonized by our compliant [consent-manufacturing](#) mass media so as to make us believe "they deserve it," our sympathy tends to disappear altogether. But to be human is to care about other humans, and we pretend otherwise at our own moral peril. Veterans who cannot keep buried their psychic wounds of combat – from Vietnam to the present wars – are committing suicide at the rate of 22 per day.

Given our somnolent acceptance of the notion that this [unprecedented state of perpetual war](#) is somehow protecting our safety, it's ironic that [military service is emerging as significantly correlated with](#), if not a cause of, America's dramatic increase in mass shootings and other domestic terror-type killings. (PTSD-related murders overall also remain uncounted.) Researchers studying recent lists of mass shooters find [veterans are over twice as likely to be mass shooters](#). Post-combat related "copy-cat" homicidal violence might be a direct externality of training and then assigning young people to commit murder overseas.

A super-hero style militaristic culture promoted by the [Pentagon](#) and [CIA-backed entertainment](#) industry (also see [this](#))

helps sustain public momentum for war but does not generate peace at home. How much worse will this problem become now that the military is relaxing its standards and accepting applicants with histories of mental illness? Earlier writing-on-the-wall consequences appeared when "Oklahoma bomber" Timothy McVeigh killed 168; "DC Sniper" John Muhammad killed 17, and Robert Flores shot his three professors. All three were veterans of the first Gulf War.

A [Homeland Security analyst warned](#) that we were creating human time bombs – only to be personally disparaged for his politically incorrect but accurate prediction.

We have an engorged, non-stop war-making machine that is reliant on high tech weapons

systems, normalized ubiquitous surveillance, the congressional hostage-taking presence of defense manufacturing and support industries or bases in every district, the narrowing of mass media discourse to stage-managed, stereotyped liberal-conservative mudslinging and subsidized glorification of war prowess, and not least, the continual re-creation of enemies to fight.

Beyond post-traumatic killings and suicides, and our massive debt, the costs of maintaining this behemoth afflicts America in other ways. Blowback is likely a factor in our record-level teen suicides, road rage incidents and shootings both of and by an increasingly militarized police force; an epidemic in opioid and other addictions; a hollowed out productive economy that underpays most workers; “Ponzi” style financing of our economy, and our utterly unsustainable late-stage imperial dependence on the war industry for our economic vitality.

We can also add the compounding of poisons into the air, water, and soil that will touch everyone’s children long into the future as we focus our wars where the oil is. This is in order to control the world’s petroleum supply, which is wrecking the world’s weather – via the activities of the number one institutional polluter in the world: the U.S. military.

Our out of control national destructiveness and its unspeakable costs constitute the “spiritual death” that Martin Luther King warned us about at the height of the Vietnam War, yet they remain mostly unaddressed in public discourse. How much longer before, finally, we can no longer pretend not to notice the taste of poison in this recipe concocted to make war palatable?

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