**Wasteful wars**

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In my lifetime of nearly 60 years, America has waged five major wars, winning one decisively, then throwing that victory away, while losing the other four disastrously. Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as the global war on terror, were the losses, of course; the cold war being the solitary win that must now be counted as a loss because its promise was so quickly discarded.

America’s war in Vietnam was waged during the cold war in the context of what was then known as the domino theory and the idea of ‘containing’ communism. Iraq and Afghanistan were part of the global war on terror, a post-cold war event in which ‘radical Islamic terrorism’ became the substitute for communism. Even so, those wars should be treated as a single strand of history, a 60-year war, if you will, for one reason alone: the explanatory power of such a concept.

For me, because of President Dwight D Eisenhower’s farewell address to the nation in January 1961, that year is the obvious starting point for what retired Army colonel and historian Andrew Bacevich recently termed America’s very long war (VLW). In that televised speech, Ike warned of the emergence of a military-industrial complex of immense strength that could someday threaten American democracy itself. I’ve chosen 2021 as the VLW’s terminus point because of the disastrous end of this country’s Afghan War, which even in its last years cost $45 billion annually to prosecute, and because of one curious reality that goes with it. In the wake of the crashing and burning of that 20-year war effort, the Pentagon budget leaped even higher with the support of almost every congressional representative of both parties as Washington’s armed attention turned to China and Russia.

At the end of two decades of globally disastrous war-making, that funding increase should tell us just how right Eisenhower was about the perils of the military-industrial complex. By failing to heed him all these years, democracy may indeed be in the process of meeting its demise.

Several things define America’s disastrous 60-year war. These would include profligacy and ferocity in the use of weaponry against peoples who could not respond in kind; enormous profiteering by the military-industrial complex; incessant lying by the US government (the evidence in the Pentagon Papers for Vietnam, the missing WMD for the invasion of Iraq, and the recent Afghan War papers); accountability-free defeats, with prominent government or military officials essentially never held responsible; and the consistent practice of a militarized Keynesianism that provided jobs and wealth to a relative few at the expense of a great many. In sum, America’s 60-year war has featured conspicuous destruction globally, even as wartime production in the US failed to better the lives of the working and middle classes as a whole.

Let’s take a closer look. Militarily speaking, throwing almost everything the US military had (nuclear arms excepted) at opponents who had next to nothing should be considered the defining feature of the VLW. During those six decades of war-making, the US military raged with white hot anger against enemies who refused to submit to its ever more powerful, technologically advanced, and destructive toys.

I’ve studied and written about the Vietnam War and yet I continue to be astounded by the sheer range of weaponry dropped on the peoples of Southeast Asia in those years – from conventional bombs and napalm to defoliants like Agent Orange that still cause deaths almost half a century after our troops finally bugged out of there. Along with all that ordnance left behind, Vietnam was a testing ground for technologies of every sort, including the infamous electronic barrier that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara sought to establish to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail.

When it came to my old service, the Air Force, Vietnam became a proving ground for the notion that airpower, using megatons of bombs, could win a war. Just about every aircraft in the inventory then was thrown at America’s alleged enemies, including bombers built for strategic nuclear attacks like the B-52 Stratofortress. The result, of course, was staggeringly widespread devastation and loss of life at considerable cost to economic fairness and social equity in this country (not to mention our humanity). Still, the companies producing all the bombs, napalm, defoliants, sensors, airplanes, and other killer products did well indeed in those years.

In terms of sheer bomb tonnage and the like, America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were more restrained, mainly thanks to the post-Vietnam development of so-called smart weapons. Nonetheless, the sort of destruction that rained down on Southeast Asia was largely repeated in the war on terror, similarly targeting lightly armed guerrilla groups and helpless civilian populations. And once again, expensive strategic bombers like the B-1, developed at a staggering cost to penetrate sophisticated Soviet air defenses in a nuclear war, were dispatched against bands of guerrillas operating in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Depleted uranium shells, white phosphorus, cluster munitions, as well as other toxic munitions, were used repeatedly. Again, short of nuclear weapons, just about every weapon that could be thrown at Iraqi soldiers, al-Qaeda or ISIS insurgents, or Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, would be used, including those venerable B-52s and, in one case, what was known as the MOAB, or mother of all bombs. And again, despite all the death and destruction, the US military would lose both wars (one functionally in Iraq and the other all too publicly in Afghanistan), even as so many in and out of that military would profit and prosper from the effort.

What kind of prosperity are we talking about? The Vietnam War cycled through an estimated $1 trillion in American wealth, the Afghan and Iraq Wars possibly more than $8 trillion (when all the bills come due from the War on Terror). Yet, despite such costly defeats, or perhaps because of them, Pentagon spending is expected to exceed $7.3 trillion over the next decade. Never in the field of human conflict has so much money been gobbled up by so few at the expense of so many.

Throughout those 60 years of the VLW, the military-industrial complex has conspicuously consumed trillions of taxpayer dollars, while the US military has rained destruction around the globe. Worse yet, those wars were generally waged with strong bipartisan support in Congress and at least not actively resisted by a significant ‘silent majority’ of Americans. In the process, they have given rise to new forms of authoritarianism and militarism, the very opposite of representative democracy.

Excerpted: ‘60 Years of War-Making May Yet Result in the Destruction of US Democracy’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org