



April 27, 2009

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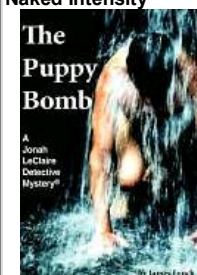
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Girl

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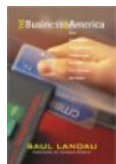
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The Business of

Posted on Apr 16, 2009

By **William Pfaff**

The American foreign policy debate usually is about what the country should do, rather than what it can do. What it can do is usually assumed to be anything Washington wants to do, since we are the most powerful nation the world has even seen.

This has created a situation in which the United States government and the political and bureaucratic classes have undertaken military project after military project that the government can't do. This is not usually commented upon but has been true since the Korean and Vietnam wars. The country's greatest victory, winning the Cold War, was in fact a gift from the Soviet Union, which lost it by collapsing.

It would be a waste of time and energy to go over once again the mighty efforts that have been put into the creation of a so-called New Middle East, which does not exist, and shows little evidence of ever existing on the terms in which the Bush administration conceived it.

Yet even now, the American "Long War" effort, under a new president, is being extended on a still more ambitious scale in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while Iraq, where as many as a million lives have been destroyed, gives sign of falling again into the internecine conflict which, alas, may be its natural condition. The same thing seems possible in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while America relentlessly toils on to construct out of them a New South Asia.

The columnist Thomas L. Friedman recently diagnosed the South Asian problem—in part correctly—as one of governments that don't work.

Their leaders promise to do what Americans tell them they should do, and they agree. They "promise to do all sorts of good things, and pull all sorts of levers, but at the end of the day the levers come off the wall because the governments in these countries have only limited powers."

True enough. But then Friedman—quite seriously, so far as I can make out—favorably considers "a greater exercise of U.S. and allied powers ... used to actually rebuild these states from the inside into modern nations. We would literally have to build the institutions—the pulleys and wheels—so that when the leaders of these states pulled a lever something actually happened."

Others in American government believe this can be done, which is why military services and civil administrative training in the American government has for the past year been directed to instruct officials how to build democratic states in such places as Afghanistan and Pakistan—"from the inside," I suppose. (Condoleezza Rice announced this new policy in Foreign Policy magazine last summer.)

This training in futility—to accomplish something impossible for foreigners—resembles nothing so much as the Defense Department's commitment to producing ever-improved Cold War weapons systems that do not, and undoubtedly never will, have foreign counterparts or challengers, while being irrelevant or unusable against the enemies the country does have. One reason the super fighter F-22 has never been used in Iraq is that there never was anything for it to do there, and the other reason was that it could easily have been shot down when operating at the necessary low altitude, its thin skin being vulnerable to rifle fire.

This organized futility is well known and much criticized. The fundamental problem is the illusion of omnipotence: America is and will continue to be omnipotent because the rest of the world expects this; it is America's Manifest Destiny.

There is an important book, "The Power Problem," just coming out in the United States (Cornell University Press), which puts forth the case that American military power naturally invites excessive or irrelevant use, and that the habits of mind created by military supremacy have caused the United States to be less safe than otherwise, less free, more vulnerable, and less able to do the things that fundamental national security demands.

Its author, Christopher A. Preble, is a former officer in the U.S. Navy and is head of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. He argues, as many others do, that the United States has a level of military power that it doesn't need, has limited utility against stateless enemies and insurgents, and causes confusion between military strength and national power, the latter being the ability to actually produce a desired effect. It is a good and lucid book and deserves a wide audience.

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By [firefly](#), April 22 at 11:04 pm #

Although it is absolutely true that America suffers an illusion of omnipotence and exceptionalism, it simply isn't true that the 'rest of the world' expects this.

This is the delusional belief (and justification) of the American people driven by their political parties and media. As long as Americans convince themselves that the 'rest of the world' wants them to be the top dog, the world's policemen and judge, then it feels vindicated acting as such. If it actually considered for one moment that this is bogus, then it would have to reconsider its actions. It can't 'afford' to do that, because it would then have no basis for a disproportionate, obscenely monstrous military.

Since WWII (the only honorable war America has ever conducted, albeit with huge reluctance) America has used fear -mongering and ideological propaganda to justify its oversized military and foreign misadventures, and continues to do so, claiming that the rest of the world is equally 'terrified' of other ideologies and therefore needs US protection and intervention. Not true.

Again, since WWII, you hardly ever hear any country 'thanking' the US for its meddling. Of course this makes America feel unappreciated, so it goes into an

ego-boosting national anthem: 'we are the greatest country in the world and other countries are so jealous of us'.

The rest of world expects America to behave like them – to be part of a family of nations, to join international treaties, participate in global accords and pacts (rather than refuse to sign up to them or even worse, co-write them and then disregard them) and use the fact that it does have more money (for the time being) to greater planetary advantage rather than dishonest self-aggrandizement.

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By **Jean Gerard**, April 19 at 9:06 pm <#>
(Unregistered commenter)

If you just think about it for one moment—how assinine it is for people in one place to want to kill people in another place instead of making friends, sharing and enjoying life, it makes you wonder whether fear and power and greed make human beings crazy. So then all they have to do is make up reasons why they are justified, and bingo! Hell on earth!

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By **barbatus**, April 18 at 2:22 pm <#>

I have to confess: my question was rhetoric 🙄

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By **Night-Gaunt**, April 18 at 1:25 pm <#>

Barbatus, just compare how the mighty USA is treating N. Korea verses Iraq and Afghanistan. What do you see that is contrasting the three? N. Korea has the great international equalizer. Nuclear weapons which is why they are so afraid Iran will be pushed into making them. (They aren't, no IAEA evidence just as there was no nukes in Iraq as they said there too.) So far Pakistan is tolerating the drone strikes in Waziristan but for how much longer as they are getting retaliatory human bombing every other day this year? (They only had 6 last year.) Pakistan does have nukes and the USA is playing with that fire by doing this against their wishes. What if Pakistan becomes part of the Neo-Con/Lib "Axis of Evil" then what will they do?

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By **2cool4politics**, April 18 at 12:19 am <#>
(Unregistered commenter)

Folktruther,

I would love to hear your explanation of why the Israeli power structure is the world's leading example of "megalomania."

Could it be, perhaps, their expansive territories, which measure out at roughly the size of Delaware?

As for the orchestration of 911, I'd love to hear your opinion on that too. But please, don't tell me that no Jews died that day.

The soapbox is yours. Just don't forget to "spellcheck" this time.

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By **Mark E. Smith**, April 17 at 6:19 pm <#>

North Korea may be a pygmy compared to the United States, but it is a giant compared to some of the countries we've been afraid of, like Cuba, Panama, Grenada, etc. Face it, bullies just like to pick on people smaller than they are.

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By **barbatus**, April 17 at 5:09 pm #

There was an old saying, either firmly forgotten or never known here: don't say you're the mightiest, for you'll eventually meet someone stronger than you.

And another thing: If the U.S. of A. are indeed the most powerful nation in the world, why this gyant is so afraid of pygmies like North Korea?

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By **prole**, April 17 at 4:24 pm #

Even though "we" are allegedly "the most powerful nation the world has even (sic) seen", for the vast majority of citizens it's a moot point because we the people are essentially powerless. This has created a situation in which the United States government and the political and bureaucratic classes have undertaken military project after military project that the government can't do" - and the people can't stop. "The country's greatest victory" - actually, it's ONLY victory since WW2 - "winning the Cold War, was in fact a gift from the Soviet Union, which lost it by collapsing" - and worse still, by listening to Western economists, afterward. "It would be a waste of time and energy to go over once again the mighty efforts that have been put into" gulling the American public into supporting these undemocratic and often times, near-genocidal policies by propagandists like the egregious Thomas Friedman, who was groomed by the NY Times to take the editorial place of the late Abe Rosenthal. Rosenthal, like Friedman, was a lifelong Zionist extremist who conceived of American power as an extension of Israeli interests. This is what Friedman means by "a greater exercise of U.S. and allied powers." "We [i.e. the U.S. and Israel] would literally have to build the institutions—the pulleys and wheels—so that when the leaders of these states pulled a lever something actually happened." The perfect definition of a "modern state" i.e. one where "leaders" pull the levers and the people are jerked about, just like in the U.S. itself. Pfaff himself agrees with Friedman that it's, "true enough" that their leaders "promise to do all sorts of good things" - i.e. 'what Americans tell them they should do' - "but at the end of the day the levers come off the wall because the governments in these countries have only limited powers." In any democracy worthy of the name the government would have "only limited powers", so if that's a problem it's not true democracy either Friedman or Pfaff are aiming for. "This training in futility—to accomplish something impossible for foreigners" i.e. to be ruled by American puppet regimes with unlimited powers pulling levers from above (little wonder they should find this impossible to accept), "resembles nothing so much as the Defense Department's commitment to producing ever-improved" pretexts for foreign interventions, now that Cold War ideology is no longer current. "One reason the super fighter F-22 has never been used in Iraq is that there never was anything for it to do there, and the other reason"... should be that America has no business being there in the first place, F-22's or no F-22's! "This organized futility is well known and much criticized. The fundamental problem is the illusion of" freedom and democracy from above. "This causes confusion between military strength and national power, the latter being the ability to actually produce a desired effect", albeit by and for a desired few - and it is as corrupting as the former. Pfaff and Preble are concerned about rescuing national power (good) from misuse of American military strength (bad), but both have "limited utility against stateless enemies and insurgents" determined to escape the crucible of Zionist imperialism. The importance of military strength however should not be underestimated nor the imminent demise of American hegemony overestimated, no matter how ardently desired. America's overwhelming military superiority insures it's dominant role in world affairs for some time to come and ultimately underwrites its national power, so there's no escaping it. Emerging powers such as China or India or Russia have too many domestic problems of their own to contend with and aren't ready to challenge American military strength head on. Someday they may take their turn as the most dangerous nation on earth but for the time being America is still public enemy # 1.

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By **Folktruther**, April 17 at 3:00 pm #

The power delusions of imperialism was discussed by Eric Hobsbawm in his latest book, and it occurs in all imperialisms, not just American imperialism. The powerful of the imperialist polity develop a what Hobsbawm calls 'megalomania', including military adventures.

This megalomania, which is most obvious in the Israeli power structure, is what

induced, in my opinion, the orchestration of 9/11 to jumpstart the War on Terrorism. the US is pursuing self-defeating policies, promoted by both Bush and Obama, which is shielded from the perception of reality by this pathological worldview. of power. The worldview promotes the death ideology as predominant in Zionism and in the right wing religious worldview.

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By **Night-Gaunt**, April 17 at 2:37 pm <#>

Too bad the **Corporate Party**, its two branches the Dems and Repubs, still dominate our country. There is a reason why they want to stop holding back the great crash of 2009 because then they can come in and tell us they can give us the order and gov't we will need to rebuild on the ruins of the Republic they want gone. A Christian fundamentalist based corporate empire is what they want. Rather like pre 1930's it is ideal for them. Just not for us.

The obvious hardliners want us to collapse* so they can get their empire built as soon as possible. We are a partial empire at best. An uneven Constitutional empire. They are incompatible as we see. That is where I disagree with Gore Vidal. It will be the final fall of the Republic not an empire that could still happen.

*<http://www.cluborlov.com> on the collapse scenario we can get into. I would estimate it would be at stage 3 when the helping claw of the **Dominionists** will be put forth to 'save' us from chaos.

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By **Mark E. Smith**, April 17 at 1:10 pm <#>

Purple Girl you are absolutely right about the Repugs.

Now if only there was some way to get the Dems to stop protecting Repugs from prosecution, stop continuing and expanding the Repug policies like bailouts, illegal wiretapping, torture, wars of aggression, etc., we'd actually have an opposition party in this country.

But we don't. So stop blaming the Republicans. Without their Democratic Party collaborators they could never have taken office, never have passed a single law, and never gotten away with what they have. The Dems hold the White House and a majority in Congress. So why hasn't ANYTHING changed except for the worse? Why are the bailouts bigger, the cuts in social services greater, the wars of aggression expanding, and the Obama administration defending illegal wiretapping and torture in the courts?

Ralph Nader called the Dems and Repugs the Corporate Party because they are just one party, what Michael Collins calls the Money Party, they are both dependent upon the big corporations for campaign donations, and they both do whatever the big corporations tell them to do. Not that a third party has a chance because the system is rigged, but it would be nice if people stopped blaming one half of the corporate party for what both halves of it do collaboratively.

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By **Purple Girl**, April 17 at 12:13 pm <#>

Repugs Shouted 'We're Number One' while they worked diligently to undermine it.

Repugs are the masters of 'Shiny objects' used to distract and confuse the small minded and lazy of our population.

Of course they've worked very hard to increase the number of small minded- Look at what is no longer available in our public schools (Art, music, Philosophy, foreign language, Sociology...- All within the curriculum a mere 30 yrs ago). And it appears they've gutted the History, Gov't and Civics classes as well.

The only thing that qualifies US as number one in healthcare is our Costs- not anything as pertinent as Infant Mortality. In fact if our life expectancy hasn't gone down, it's at least stagnated. Which is not necessarily a Bad thing- We should do the younger generations a favor and Die in a timely manner anyway.

Militarily we cut our own throats by limiting Who can serve- woman only in Non Combat posts and certainly not anyone who may be Homosexual- how short sighted and archaic is that!

Our nations Progress got stopped dead in its tracks about 4 decades ago, and has been steadily sliding back towards the Dark Ages ever since.

No Taxes? What part of civilized society are you willing to give Up? Your kids education, Your parents long term care, Your Police/Fire Dept, The access and maintenance to utilities and infrastructures? Because Sweetheart the Corps aren't going to kick in for any of that! How much did Exxon contribute to a community- or US in general- of that 45 Billion in Profits- new Sports Arena with their name, maybe. Wow big help in meeting the social obligations of an Advance Society! Taxes aren't the cause of our Woes- it's the unfetter Corps profit margins. They screw the labor with shit wages, charge outrageous prices and suck up all the resources, Then move on to the next Global victim. They used and Abused US like Whores then left US on the side of the road, In search of their next conquest. The Corps are institutions of Serial Rape and mass murders, A scourge upon Humanity. It's time we start prosecuting them as such.

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By **eileen fleming**, April 17 at 8:43 am <#>

A healthy democracy thrives on dissent and requires an active engaged citizenry to lead leaders in the way they should go; and what is most lacking in USA foreign policy is common sense and empathy!

"Soon after I had published the pamphlet "Common Sense" [on Feb. 14, 1776] in America, I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion... The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion."-Tom Paine

"The age of warrior kings and of warrior presidents has passed. The nuclear age calls for a different kind of leadership....a leadership of intellect, judgment, tolerance and rationality, a leadership committed to human values, to world peace, and to the improvement of the human condition. The attributes upon which we must draw are the human attributes of compassion and common sense, of intellect and creative imagination, and of empathy and understanding between cultures." - William Fulbright

e <http://www.wearewideawake.org/>

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By **jackpine savage**, April 17 at 7:58 am <#>

The American foreign policy debate usually is about what the country should do, rather than what it can do. What it can do is usually assumed to be anything Washington wants to do. . .

The best two sentence description of US foreign policy ever penned. Well said, sir.

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By **warren**, April 17 at 3:43 am <#>

(Unregistered commenter)

Another good article from Mr. Pfaff. Interesting that the British were proud of their empire and luxuriated in its reflected glory. Americans have traditionally been told they don't have one: we are a democracy not an empire. But no sooner is the skeleton out the closet; well yes Okay already, we do have an empire but it's dying. But even black soldiers, who wear the uniform serving abroad, know the truth and walk with a proud swagger in foreign lands. You see, the respect they never receive at home, they get abroad.

But the empire as Mr. Pfaff so well argues, will be America's undoing, it has taken on an unhealthy life of its own, still supported by Democrats and Republicans alike. Returning to the Brits once again - the British had the foresight to dump their empire, but Americans are too much in love with their shiny weapons to be able to do this. And he is right about the Russians collapsing from within, rather than being defeated from without.

Another myth exposed is the fact that Americans are not really all that good at empires, (not really good at fighting actually), the Brits and the Romans were much better. And it was the Russians that really defeated Nazi Germany not the

Americans and Brits. Stalingrad was Hitler's undoing where he lost his undefeated 6th Army, and the tank battle of Kursk (actually a huge military event and the largest tank battle ever to take place, and arguably still is) that followed. It was this that defeated the Wehrmacht. But Americans are lousy at history anyway. But as in law, so in life, ignorance is no defense.

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By **Eso**, April 17 at 3:39 am <#>

True, but this also has to be added: the U.S. "ideology", re ne-liberalisms and post-neo-liberalism in shot as an intellectual force, because its failure and the reasons for it are now transparent and in the process of losing accreditation.

Given this situation, it would be best for the U.S. to take stock of itself. Neither it or China, or Russia, or the EU are likely to be the determinant factors that shape the future, because the future already has overgrown with present-day weeds.

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By **marc medler**, April 17 at 2:35 am <#>
(Unregistered commenter)

These are excellent references and a good contribution to a central problem facing federal leaders in the near and mid term future. All of this is made more acute given some very clear economic limits. However, I wonder if these looming limits and contradictions in regards to the role of a very expensive military establishment would be as acute if our mighty forces were bringing home "war booty" that was shared with all the people. A country's military needs to be given a clear mandate as to its role. In some nations it is used to control and repress it's population. In others it is used to protect the borders and the safety of citizens from predators. Empires use armies to loot and intimidate others for economic enrichment of the home country's citizens—until. We are an empire run by oligarchs that are no longer loyal to distributing the booty to citizens that die and pay for that looting and intimidation, hence the until. I warn all that in this inevitable reform of the Imperial American military we need to pray that the generals love of P* does not overtake their consanguinity with the rest of us. Otherwise they will choose the China or Argentina option of squatting on their own compatriots. *power,privilege,profit,property

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By **William Johnson**, April 17 at 12:18 am <#>
(Unregistered commenter)

Well, no kidding!
It will continue until we are completely bankrupt, since there is so much money to be made by the complex.
Besides, until Americans have a memory span longer than the next big story, are completely broke and realize we now have fiat money, nothing will change. The super rich have always been in charge and history is lost on folks because it does not affect them, or so they think.
Watch the fall of Rome one more time, since we are in it.
My ancestors predicted exactly what is happening now, so good luck to you. We tried to help you when you first arrived, but trying to kill us all was your response.
U.S. policy has not changed at all since the murderer Columbus came here. Sorry, but that's the way it is and trying to do the same thing over the whole globe will only speed up the process of the demise of what could have been a democracy we already had before the arrival of the takers.
Peace is an unknown concept to the powers that be, while they act against the average persons interests and their own. THEIR JUST TO GREEDY TO UNDERSTAND THIS.

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By **Ed Harges**, April 16 at 7:40 pm <#>

This is so true. While the best and brightest in Washington continue to pretend that the US enjoys global dominion, the New York Times reports today that China is moving into Latin America in a big way, opening its fat checkbook and

showering tens of billions of dollars on Brazil, Venezuela, and other resource-rich countries in what the US considers its backyard. The Beltway boys still think we have an empire, even as our influence is rapidly shrinking to pre-Monroe Doctrine levels.

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