

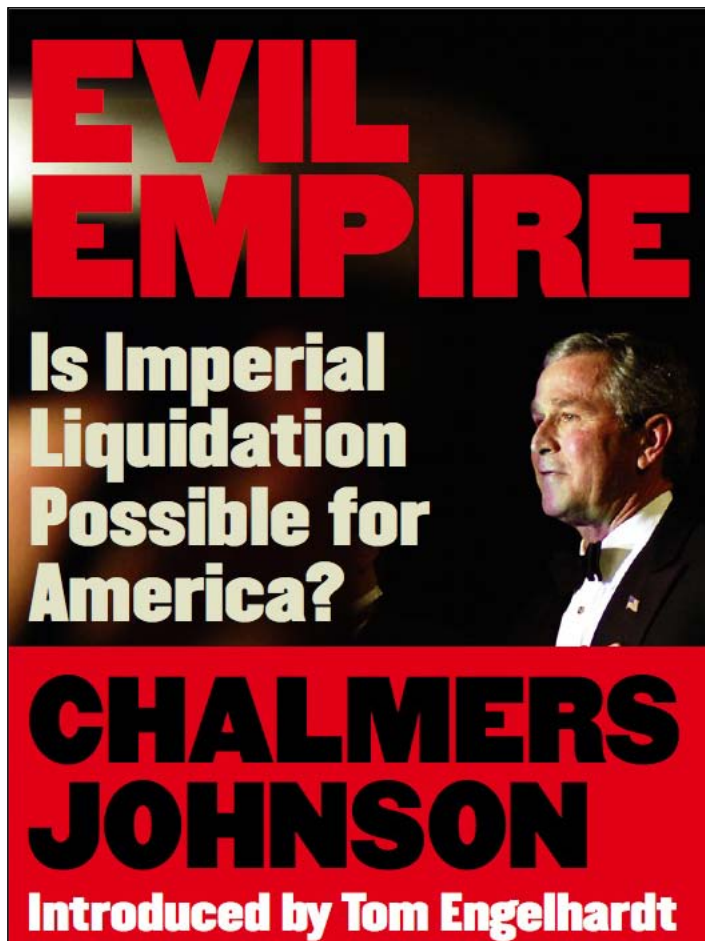
EVIL EMPIRE

Is Imperial
Liquidation
Possible for
America?



CHALMERS JOHNSON

Introduced by Tom Engelhardt



Chalmers Johnson is the author of *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007). It is the final volume of his *Blowback Trilogy*

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This essay originally appeared on the TomDispatch.com web site

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INTRODUCTION

Tom Engelhardt

Way back in 1999, when I was still a TomDispatch-less book editor, I read a proposal from Chalmers Johnson. He was, then, known mainly as a scholar of modern Japan, though years earlier I had read his brilliant book on Chinese peasant nationalism – about a period in the 1940s when imperial Japan was carrying out its “3-all” campaigns (kill-all, burn-all, loot-all) in the northern Chinese countryside. The proposal, for a book to be called *Blowback* – a CIA term of tradecraft that, like most Americans, I had never heard before – focused on the “unintended consequences” of the Agency’s covert activities abroad and the disasters they might someday bring down upon us. Johnson began with an introduction in which he reviewed, among other things, his experiences in the Vietnam War era when, as a professed Cold Warrior, a former CIA consultant, and a professor of Asian studies at Berkeley, he would have been on the other side of the political fence from me.

In that introduction, he recalled his dismay with antiwar activists who were, he felt (not incorrectly), often blindly romantic about Asian communism and hadn’t bothered to do their homework on the subject. “They were,” he wrote, “defining the Vietnamese Communists largely out of their own romantic desires to oppose Washington’s policies.” He added:

“As it turned out, however, they understood far better than I did the impulse of a Robert McNamara, a McGeorge Bundy, or a Walt Rostow. They grasped something essential about the nature of America’s imperial role in the world that I had failed to perceive. In retrospect, I wish I had stood with the antiwar protest movement. For all its naïveté and unruliness, it was right and American policy wrong.”

It was a reversal of sentiment to which no other American of his age and background, to the best of my knowledge, had admitted. It reflected a mind impressively willing to reconsider and change – and, as it happened, it also reflected a man on a journey out of the world of Cold War anti-communism and into the heart of the American empire. When

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Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire finally came out in 2000, it was largely ignored (or derided) in the mainstream – until, that is, September 11th, 2001. Then, "blowback," and the phrase that went with it, "unintended consequences," entered our language, thanks to Johnson, and the paperback of the book, now seen as prophetic, hit the 9/11 tables in bookstores across the United States, becoming a bestseller.

Johnson's intellectual odyssey had begun when the Cold War ended, when the Soviet Union disappeared and the American imperial structure of bases (and policy) in Asia remained standing, remarkably unchanged and unaffected by that seemingly world-shaking event. An invitation, five years later, to visit the heavily American-garrisoned Japanese island of Okinawa, in turmoil over a case in which two U.S. Marines and a sailor had raped a 12 year-old Okinawan girl, also strongly affected his thinking. There, Johnson saw firsthand what our global baseworld looked like and what it did to others on this planet. ("I was flabbergasted by the 37 American military bases I found on an island smaller than Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands and the enormous pressures it put on the population there... As I began to study it, though, I discovered that Okinawa was not exceptional. It was the norm. It was what you find in all of the American military enclaves around the world.")

Now, five and a half years after the 9/11 attacks, Johnson has reached the provisional end of his quest and the single prophetic volume, *Blowback*, has become *The Blowback Trilogy*. In 2004, a second volume, *The Sorrows of Empire*, arrived, focused on how the American military had garrisoned the globe and how militarism had us in its grip; and finally, this year, a magisterial third and final volume, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, appeared. No one should miss it. It lays out in chilling detail the ways in which imperial overstretch imperils the American republic and what's left of our democratic system as well as the American economy.

Now, in a step beyond even his latest book, Johnson considers whether we can end our empire before it ends us.

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Is Imperial Liquidation Possible for America?

By Chalmers Johnson

In politics, as in medicine, a cure based on a false diagnosis is almost always worthless, often worsening the condition that is supposed to be healed. The United States, today, suffers from a plethora of public ills. Most of them can be traced to the militarism and imperialism that have led to the near-collapse of our Constitutional system of checks and balances. Unfortunately, none of the remedies proposed so far by American politicians or analysts addresses the root causes of the problem. According to an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, released on April 26, 2007, some 78% of Americans believe their country to be headed in the wrong direction. Only 22% think the Bush administration's policies make sense, the lowest number on this question since October 1992, when George H. W. Bush was running for a second term – and lost. What people don't agree on are the reasons for their doubts and, above all, what the remedy – or remedies – ought to be.

The range of opinions on this is immense. Even though large numbers of voters vaguely suspect that the failings of the political system itself led the country into its current crisis, most evidently expect the system to perform a course correction more or less automatically. As Adam Nagourney of the New York Times reported, by the end of March 2007, at least 280,000 American citizens had already contributed some \$113.6 million to the presidential campaigns of Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards, Mitt Romney, Rudolph Giuliani, or John McCain.

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If these people actually believe a presidential election a year-and-a-half from now will significantly alter how the country is run, they have almost surely wasted their money. As Andrew Bacevich, author of *The New American Militarism*, puts it: "None of the Democrats vying to replace President Bush is doing so with the promise of reviving the system of check and balances.... The aim of the party out of power is not to cut the presidency down to size but to seize it, not to reduce the prerogatives of the executive branch but to regain them."

George W. Bush has, of course, flagrantly violated his oath of office, which requires him "to protect and defend the constitution," and the opposition party has been remarkably reluctant to hold him to account. Among the "high crimes and misdemeanors" that, under other political circumstances, would surely constitute the Constitutional grounds for impeachment are these: the President and his top officials pressured the Central Intelligence Agency to put together a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq's nuclear weapons that both the administration and the Agency knew to be patently dishonest. They then used this false NIE to justify an American war of aggression. After launching an invasion of Iraq, the administration unilaterally reinterpreted international and domestic law to permit the torture of prisoners held at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and at other secret locations around the world.

Nothing in the Constitution, least of all the commander-in-chief clause, allows the president to commit felonies. Nonetheless, within days after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush had signed a secret executive order authorizing a new policy of "extraordinary rendition," in which the CIA is allowed to kidnap terrorist suspects anywhere on Earth and transfer them to prisons in countries like Egypt, Syria, or Uzbekistan, where torture is a normal practice, or to secret CIA prisons outside the United States where Agency operatives themselves do the torturing.

On the home front, despite the post-9/11 congressional authorization of new surveillance powers to the administration, its officials chose to ignore these and, on its own initiative, undertook extensive spying on American citizens without obtaining the necessary judicial warrants and without reporting to Congress on this program. These actions are prima-facie violations of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (and subsequent revisions) and of Amendment IV of the Constitution.

These alone constitute more than adequate grounds for impeachment, while hardly scratching the surface. And yet, on the eve of the national elections of November 2006, then House Minority Leader, now Speaker, Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), pledged on the CBS News program "60 Minutes" that "impeachment is off the table." She called it "a waste of time." And six months after the Democratic Party took control of both houses of Congress, the prison at Guantánamo Bay was still open and conducting drumhead courts martial of the prisoners held there; the CIA was still using "enhanced interrogation techniques" on prisoners in foreign jails; illegal intrusions into the privacy of American citizens continued unabated; and,

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more than fifty years after the CIA was founded, it continues to operate under, at best, the most perfunctory congressional oversight.

Promoting Lies, Demoting Democracy

Without question, the administration's catastrophic war in Iraq is the single overarching issue that has convinced a large majority of Americans that the country is "heading in the wrong direction." But the war itself is the outcome of an imperial presidency and the abject failure of Congress to perform its Constitutional duty of oversight. Had the government been working as the authors of the Constitution intended, the war could not have occurred. Even now, the Democratic majority remains reluctant to use its power of the purse to cut off funding for the war, thereby ending the American occupation of Iraq and starting to curtail the ever-growing power of the military-industrial complex.

One major problem of the American social and political system is the failure of the press, especially television news, to inform the public about the true breadth of the unconstitutional activities of the executive branch. As Frederick A. O. Schwarz and Aziz Z. Huq, the authors of *Unchecked and Unbalanced: Presidential Power in a Time of Terror*, observe, "For the public to play its proper checking role at the ballot box, citizens must know what is done by the government in their names."

Instead of uncovering administration lies and manipulations, the media actively promoted them. Yet the first amendment to the Constitution protects the press precisely so it can penetrate the secrecy that is the bureaucrat's most powerful, self-protective weapon. As a result of this failure, democratic oversight of the government by an actively engaged citizenry did not – and could not – occur. The people of the United States became mere spectators as an array of ideological extremists, vested interests, and foreign operatives – including domestic neoconservatives, Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi exiles, the Israeli Lobby, the petroleum and automobile industries, warmongers and profiteers allied with the military-industrial complex, and the entrenched interests of the professional military establishment – essentially hijacked the government.

Some respected professional journalists do not see these failings as the mere result of personal turpitude but rather as deep structural and cultural problems within the American system as it exists today. In an interview with Matt Taibbi, Seymour Hersh, for forty years one of America's leading investigative reporters, put the matter this way:

"All of the institutions we thought would protect us – particularly the press, but also the military, the bureaucracy, the Congress – they have failed... So all the things that we expect would normally carry us through didn't. The biggest failure, I would argue, is the press, because that's the most glaring.... What can be done to fix the situation? [long pause] You'd have to fire or execute ninety percent of the editors and executives."

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Veteran analyst of the press (and former presidential press secretary), Bill Moyers, considering a classic moment of media failure, concluded: "The disgraceful press reaction to Colin Powell's presentation at the United Nations [on February 5, 2003] seems like something out of Monty Python, with one key British report cited by Powell being nothing more than a student's thesis, downloaded from the Web – with the student later threatening to charge U.S. officials with 'plagiarism.'"

As a result of such multiple failures (still ongoing), the executive branch easily misled the American public.

A Made-in-America Human Catastrophe

Of the failings mentioned by Hersh, that of the military is particularly striking, resembling as it does the failures of the Vietnam era, thirty-plus years earlier. One would have thought the high command had learned some lessons from the defeat of 1975. Instead, it once again went to war pumped up on our own propaganda – especially the conjoined beliefs that the United States was the "indispensable nation," the "lone superpower," and the "victor" in the Cold War; and that it was a new Rome the likes of which the world had never seen, possessing as it did – from the heavens to the remotest spot on the planet – "full spectrum dominance." The idea that the U.S. was an unquestioned military colossus athwart the world, which no power or people could effectively oppose, was hubristic nonsense certain to get the country into deep trouble – as it did – and bring the U.S. Army to the point of collapse, as happened in Vietnam and may well happen again in Iraq (and Afghanistan).

Instead of behaving in a professional manner, our military invaded Iraq with far too small a force; failed to respond adequately when parts of the Iraqi Army (and Baathist Party) went underground; tolerated an orgy of looting and lawlessness throughout the country; disobeyed orders and ignored international obligations (including the obligation of an occupying power to protect the facilities and treasures of the occupied country – especially, in this case, Baghdad's National Museum and other archaeological sites of untold historic value); and incompetently fanned the flames of an insurgency against our occupation, committing numerous atrocities against unarmed Iraqi civilians.

According to Andrew Bacevich, "Next to nothing can be done to salvage Iraq. It no longer lies within the capacity of the United States to determine the outcome of events there." Our former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas W. Freeman, says of President Bush's recent "surge" strategy in Baghdad and al-Anbar Province: "The reinforcement of failure is a poor substitute for its correction."

Symbolically, a certain sign of the disaster to come in Iraq arrived via an April 26th posting from the courageous but anonymous Sunni woman who has, since August 2003, published the indispensable blog Baghdad Burning. Her family, she reported, was finally giving

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up and going into exile – joining up to two million of her compatriots who have left the country. In her final dispatch, she wrote:

"There are moments when the injustice of having to leave your country simply because an imbecile got it into his head to invade it, is overwhelming. It is unfair that in order to survive and live normally, we have to leave our home and what remains of family and friends.... And to what?"

Retired General Barry McCaffrey, commander of the 24th Infantry Division in the first Iraq war and a consistent cheerleader for Bush strategies in the second, recently radically changed his tune. He now says, "No Iraqi government official, coalition soldier, diplomat, reporter, foreign NGO, nor contractor can walk the streets of Baghdad, nor Mosul, nor Kirkuk, nor Basra, nor Tikrit, nor Najaf, nor Ramadi, without heavily armed protection." In a different context, Gen. McCaffrey has concluded: "The U.S. Army is rapidly unraveling."

Even military failure in Iraq is still being spun into an endless web of lies and distortions by the White House, the Pentagon, military pundits, and the now-routine reporting of propagandists disguised as journalists. For example, in the first months of 2007, rising car-bomb attacks in Baghdad were making a mockery of Bush administration and Pentagon claims that the U.S. troop escalation in the capital had brought about "a dramatic drop in sectarian violence." The official response to this problem: the Pentagon simply quit including deaths from car bombings in its count of sectarian casualties. (It has never attempted to report civilian casualties publicly or accurately.) Since August 2003, there have been over 1,050 car bombings in Iraq. One study estimates that through June 2006 the death toll from these alone has been a staggering 78,000 Iraqis.

The war and occupation George W. Bush unleashed in Iraq has proved unimaginably lethal for unarmed civilians, but reporting the true levels of lethality in Iraq, or the nature of the direct American role in it was, for a long time, virtually taboo in the U.S. media. As late as October 2006, the journal of the British Medical Association, *The Lancet*, published a study conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad estimating that, since March 2003, there were some 601,027 more Iraqi deaths from violence than would have been expected without a war. The British and American governments at first dismissed the findings, claiming the research was based on faulty statistical methods – and the American media ignored the study, played down its importance, or dismissed its figures.

On March 27, 2007, however, it was revealed that the chief scientific adviser to the British Ministry of Defense, Roy Anderson, had offered a more honest response. The methods used in the study were, he wrote, "close to best practice." Another British official described them as "a tried and tested way of measuring mortality in conflict zones." Over 600,000 violent deaths in a population estimated in 2006 at 26.8 million – that is, one in every 45 individuals – amounts to a made-in-America human catastrophe.

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One subject that the government, the military, and the news media try to avoid like the plague is the racist and murderous culture of rank-and-file American troops when operating abroad. Partly as a result of the background racism that is embedded in many Americans' mental make-up and the propaganda of American imperialism that is drummed into recruits during military training, they do not see assaults on unarmed "rag heads" or "hajis" as murder. The cult of silence on this subject began to slip only slightly in May 2007 when a report prepared by the Army's Mental Health Advisory Team was leaked to the San Diego Union-Tribune. Based on anonymous surveys and focus groups involving 1,320 soldiers and 447 Marines, the study revealed that only 56% of soldiers would report a unit member for injuring or killing an innocent noncombatant, while a mere 40% of Marines would do so. Some militarists will reply that such inhumanity to the defenseless is always inculcated into the properly trained soldier. If so, then the answer to this problem is to ensure that, in the future, there are many fewer imperialist wars of choice sponsored by the United States.

The Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex

Many other aspects of imperialism and militarism are undermining America's Constitutional system. By now, for example, the privatization of military and intelligence functions is totally out of control, beyond the law, and beyond any form of Congressional oversight. It is also incredibly lucrative for the owners and operators of so-called private military companies – and the money to pay for their activities ultimately comes from taxpayers through government contracts. Any accounting of these funds, largely distributed to crony companies with insider connections, is chaotic at best. Jeremy Scahill, author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, estimates that there are 126,000 private military contractors in Iraq, more than enough to keep the war going, even if most official U.S. troops were withdrawn. "From the beginning," Scahill writes, "these contractors have been a major hidden story of the war, almost uncovered in the mainstream media and absolutely central to maintaining the U.S. occupation of Iraq."

America's massive "military" budgets, still on the rise, are beginning to threaten the U.S. with bankruptcy, given that its trade and fiscal deficits already easily make it the world's largest net debtor nation. Spending on the military establishment – sometimes mislabeled "defense spending" – has soared to the highest levels since World War II, exceeding the budgets of the Korean and Vietnam War eras as well as President Ronald Reagan's weapons-buying binge in the 1980s. According to calculations by the National Priorities Project, a non-profit research organization that examines the local impact of federal spending policies, military spending today consumes 40% of every tax dollar.

Equally alarming, it is virtually impossible for a member of Congress or an ordinary citizen to obtain even a modest handle on the actual size of military spending or its impact on the

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structure and functioning of our economic system. Some \$30 billion of the official Defense Department (DoD) appropriation in the current fiscal year is "black," meaning that it is allegedly going for highly classified projects. Even the open DoD budget receives only perfunctory scrutiny because members of Congress, seeking lucrative defense contracts for their districts, have mutually beneficial relationships with defense contractors and the Pentagon. President Dwight D. Eisenhower identified this phenomenon, in the draft version of his 1961 farewell address, as the "military-industrial-congressional complex." Forty-six years later, in a way even Eisenhower probably couldn't have imagined, the defense budget is beyond serious congressional oversight or control.

The DoD always tries to minimize the size of its budget by representing it as a declining percentage of the gross national product. What it never reveals is that total military spending is actually many times larger than the official appropriation for the Defense Department. For fiscal year 2006, Robert Higgs of the Independent Institute calculated national security outlays at almost a trillion dollars – \$934.9 billion to be exact – broken down as follows (in billions of dollars):

Department of Defense: \$499.4

Department of Energy (atomic weapons): \$16.6

Department of State (foreign military aid): \$25.3

Department of Veterans Affairs (treatment of wounded soldiers): \$69.8

Department of Homeland Security (actual defense): \$69.1

Department of Justice (1/3rd for the FBI): \$1.9

Department of the Treasury (military retirements): \$38.5

NASA (satellite launches): \$7.6

Interest on war debts, 1916-present: \$206.7

Totaled, the sum is larger than the combined sum spent by all other nations on military security.

This spending helps sustain the national economy and represents, essentially, a major jobs program. However, it is beginning to crowd out the civilian economy, causing stagnation in income levels. It also contributes to the hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs to other coun-

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tries. On May 1, 2007, the Center for Economic and Policy Research released a series of estimates on "the economic impact of the Iraq war and higher military spending." Its figures show, among other things, that, after an initial demand stimulus, the effect of a significant rise in military spending (as we've experienced in recent years) turns negative around the sixth year.

Sooner or later, higher military spending forces inflation and interest rates up, reducing demand in interest-sensitive sectors of the economy, notably in annual car and truck sales. Job losses follow. The non-military construction and manufacturing sectors experience the largest share of these losses. The report concludes, "Most economic models show that military spending diverts resources from productive uses, such as consumption and investment, and ultimately slows economic growth and reduces employment."

Imperial Liquidation?

Imperialism and militarism have thus begun to imperil both the financial and social well-being of our republic. What the country desperately needs is a popular movement to rebuild the Constitutional system and subject the government once again to the discipline of checks and balances. Neither the replacement of one political party by the other, nor protectionist economic policies aimed at rescuing what's left of our manufacturing economy will correct what has gone wrong. Both of these solutions fail to address the root cause of our national decline.

I believe that there is only one solution to the crisis we face. The American people must make the decision to dismantle both the empire that has been created in their name and the huge (still growing) military establishment that undergirds it. It is a task at least comparable to that undertaken by the British government when, after World War II, it liquidated the British Empire. By doing so, Britain avoided the fate of the Roman Republic – becoming a domestic tyranny and losing its democracy, as would have been required if it had continued to try to dominate much of the world by force.

For the U.S., the decision to mount such a campaign of imperial liquidation may already come too late, given the vast and deeply entrenched interests of the military-industrial complex. To succeed, such an endeavor might virtually require a revolutionary mobilization of the American citizenry, one at least comparable to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Even to contemplate a drawing back from empire – something so inconceivable to our pundits and newspaper editorial writers that it is simply never considered – we must specify as clearly as possible precisely what the elected leaders and citizens of the United States would have to do. Two cardinal decisions would have to be made. First, in Iraq, we would have to initiate a firm timetable for withdrawing all our military forces and turning over the

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permanent military bases we have built to the Iraqis. Second, domestically, we would have to reverse federal budget priorities.

In the words of Noam Chomsky, a venerable critic of American imperialism: "Where spending is rising, as in military supplemental bills to conduct the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would sharply decline. Where spending is steady or declining (health, education, job training, the promotion of energy conservation and renewable energy sources, veterans benefits, funding for the UN and UN peacekeeping operations, and so on), it would sharply increase. Bush's tax cuts for people with incomes over \$200,000 a year would be immediately rescinded."

Such reforms would begin at once to reduce the malevolent influence of the military-industrial complex, but many other areas would require attention as well. As part of the process of de-garrisoning the planet and liquidating our empire, we would have to launch an orderly closing-up process for at least 700 of the 737 military bases we maintain (by official Pentagon count) in over 130 foreign countries on every continent except Antarctica. We should ultimately aim at closing all our imperialist enclaves, but in order to avoid isolationism and maintain a capacity to assist the United Nations in global peacekeeping operations, we should, for the time being, probably retain some 37 of them, mostly naval and air bases.

Equally important, we should rewrite all our Status of Forces Agreements – those American-dictated "agreements" that exempt our troops based in foreign countries from local criminal laws, taxes, immigration controls, anti-pollution legislation, and anything else the American military can think of. It must be established as a matter of principle and law that American forces stationed outside the U.S. will deal with their host nations on a basis of equality, not of extraterritorial privilege.

The American approach to diplomatic relations with the rest of the world would also require a major overhaul. We would have to end our belligerent unilateralism toward other countries as well as our scofflaw behavior regarding international law. Our objective should be to strengthen the United Nations, including our respect for its majority, by working to end the Security Council veto system (and by stopping using our present right to veto). The United States needs to cease being the world's largest supplier of arms and munitions – a lethal trade whose management should be placed under UN supervision. We should encourage the UN to begin outlawing weapons like land mines, cluster bombs, and depleted-uranium ammunition that play particularly long-term havoc with civilian populations. As part of an attempt to right the diplomatic balance, we should take some obvious steps like recognizing Cuba and ending our blockade of that island and, in the Middle East, working to equalize aid to Israel and Palestine, while attempting to broker a real solution to that disastrous situation. Our goal should be a return to leading by example – and by sound arguments – rather than by continual resort to unilateral armed force and repeated foreign military inter-

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ventions.

In terms of the organization of the executive branch, we need to rewrite the National Security Act of 1947, taking away from the CIA all functions that involve sabotage, torture, subversion, overseas election rigging, rendition, and other forms of clandestine activity. The president should be deprived of his power to order these types of operations except with the explicit advice and consent of the Senate. The CIA should basically devote itself to the collection and analysis of foreign intelligence. We should eliminate as much secrecy as possible so that neither the CIA, nor any other comparable organization ever again becomes the president's private army.

In order to halt our economic decline and lessen our dependence on our trading partners, the U.S. must cap its trade deficits through the perfectly legal use of tariffs in accordance with World Trade Organization rules, and it must begin to guide its domestic market in accordance with a national industrial policy, just as the leading economies of the world (particularly the Japanese and Chinese ones) do as a matter of routine. Even though it may involve trampling on the vested interests of American university economics departments, there is simply no excuse for a continued reliance on an outdated doctrine of "free trade."

Normally, a proposed list of reforms like this would simply be rejected as utopian. I understand this reaction. I do want to stress, however, that failure to undertake such reforms would mean condemning the United States to the fate that befell the Roman Republic and all other empires since then. That is why I gave my book *Nemesis* the subtitle "The Last Days of the American Republic."

When Ronald Reagan coined the phrase "evil empire," he was referring to the Soviet Union, and I basically agreed with him that the USSR needed to be contained and checkmated. But today it is the U.S. that is widely perceived as an evil empire and world forces are gathering to stop us. The Bush administration insists that if we leave Iraq our enemies will "win" or – even more improbably – "follow us home." I believe that, if we leave Iraq and our other imperial enclaves, we can regain the moral high ground and disavow the need for a foreign policy based on preventive war. I also believe that unless we follow this path, we will lose our democracy and then it will not matter much what else we lose. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us."



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