

# For Money, For Oil? Why Wars Really Happen

By [David Swanson](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Many discussions of lies that launch wars quickly come around to the question “Well then why did they want the war?” There is usually more than one single motive involved, but the motives are not terribly hard to find.

Unlike many soldiers who have been lied to, most of the key war deciders, the masters of war who determine whether or not wars happen, do not in any sense have noble motives for what they do. Though noble motives can be found in the reasoning of some of those involved, even in some of those at the highest levels of decision making, it is very doubtful that such noble intentions alone would ever generate wars.

Economic and imperial motives have been offered by presidents and congress members for most of our major wars, but they have not been endlessly hyped and dramatized as have other alleged motivations. War with Japan was largely about the economic value of Asia, but fending off the evil Japanese emperor made a better poster. The Project for the New American Century, a think tank pushing for war on Iraq, made its motives clear a dozen years before it got its war — motives that included U.S. military dominance of the globe with more and larger bases in key regions of “American interest.” That goal was not repeated as often or as shrilly as “WMD,” “terrorism,” “evildoer,” or “spreading democracy.”

The most important motivations for wars are the least talked about, and the least important or completely fraudulent motivations are the most discussed. The important motivations, the things the war masters mostly discuss in private, include electoral calculations, control of natural resources, intimidation of other countries, domination of geographic regions, financial profits for friends and campaign funders, the opening up of consumer markets, and prospects for testing new weapons.

If politicians were honest, electoral calculations would deserve to be openly discussed and would constitute no ground for shame or secrecy. Elected officials ought to do what will get them reelected, within the structure of laws that have been democratically established. But our conception of democracy has become so twisted that reelection as a motivation for action is hidden away alongside profiteering. This is true for all areas of government work; the election process is so corrupt that the public is viewed as yet another corrupting influence. When it comes to war, this sense is heightened by politicians’ awareness that wars are marketed with lies.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The Project for the New American Century (PNAC) was a think tank from 1997 to 2006 in Washington, D.C. (later revived in 2009). Seventeen members of PNAC served in high positions in the George W. Bush administration, including Vice President, Chief of Staff to

the Vice President, Special Assistant to the President, Deputy Secretary of “Defense,” ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq, Deputy Secretary of State, and Under Secretary of State.

One individual who was part of PNAC and later of the Bush Administration, Richard Perle, together with another Bush bureaucrat-to-be Douglas Feith, had worked for Israeli Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 and produced a paper called *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*. The realm was Israel, and the strategy advocated was hyper-militarized nationalism and the violent removal of regional foreign leaders including Saddam Hussein.

In 1998, PNAC published an open letter to President Bill Clinton urging him to adopt the goal of regime change for Iraq, which he did. That letter included this:

“[I]f Saddam does acquire the capability to deliver weapons of mass destruction, as he is almost certain to do if we continue along the present course, the safety of American troops in the region, of our friends and allies like Israel and the moderate Arab states, and a significant portion of the world’s supply of oil will all be put at hazard.”

In 2000, PNAC published a paper titled *Rebuilding America’s Defenses*. The goals set forth in this paper fit much more coherently with the actual behavior of the masters of war than do any notions of “spreading democracy” or “standing up to tyranny.” When Iraq attacks Iran we help out. When it attacks Kuwait we step in. When it does nothing we bomb it. This behavior makes no sense in terms of the fictional stories we’re told, but makes perfect sense in terms of these goals from PNAC:

- maintaining U.S. preeminence,
- precluding the rise of a great power rival, and
- shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests.

PNAC determined that we would need to “fight and decisively win multiple, simultaneous major theater wars” and “perform the ‘constabulary’ duties associated with shaping the security environment in critical regions.” In the same 2000 paper, PNAC wrote:

“While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein. The placement of U.S. bases has yet to reflect these realities....From an American perspective, the value of such bases would endure even should Saddam pass from the scene. Over the long term, Iran may well prove as large a threat to U.S. interests in the Gulf as Iraq has. And even should U.S.-Iranian relations improve, retaining forward- based forces in the region would still be an essential element in U.S. security strategy. . . .”

These papers were published and widely available years before the invasion of Iraq, and yet to suggest that U.S. forces would try to stay and build permanent bases in Iraq even after killing Saddam Hussein was scandalous in the halls of Congress or the corporate media. To suggest that the War on Iraq had anything to do with our imperial bases or oil or Israel, much less that Hussein did not as yet have weapons, was heretical. Even worse was to

suggest that those bases might be used to launch attacks on other countries, in line with PNAC's goal of "maintaining U.S. preeminence." And yet Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO from 1997 to 2000 Wesley Clark claims that in 2001, Secretary of War Donald Rumsfeld put out a memo proposing to take over seven countries in five years: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran.

The basic outline of this plan was confirmed by none other than former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who in 2010 pinned it on former Vice President Dick Cheney:

"Cheney wanted forcible 'regime change' in all Middle Eastern countries that he considered hostile to U.S. interests, according to Blair. 'He would have worked through the whole lot, Iraq, Syria, Iran, dealing with all their surrogates in the course of it — Hezbollah, Hamas, etc.,' Blair wrote. 'In other words, he [Cheney] thought the world had to be made anew, and that after 11 September, it had to be done by force and with urgency. So he was for hard, hard power. No ifs, no buts, no maybes.'"

Crazy? Sure! But that's what succeeds in Washington. As each of those invasions happened, new excuses would have been made public for each. But the underlying reasons would have remained those quoted above.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Part of the ethos of "toughness" required of U.S. war makers has been a habit of thought that detects a major, global, and demonic enemy behind every shadow. For decades the enemy was the Soviet Union and the threat of global communism. But the Soviet Union never had the global military presence of the United States or the same interest in empire building. Its weapons and threats and aggressions were constantly exaggerated, and its presence was detected anytime a small, poor nation put up resistance to U.S. dominance. Koreans and Vietnamese, Africans and South Americans couldn't possibly have their own sovereign interests, it was assumed. If they were refusing our unsolicited guidance, somebody had to be putting them up to it.

A commission created by President Reagan called the Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy proposed more small wars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Concerns included "U.S. access to critical regions," "American credibility among allies and friends," "American self-confidence," and "America's ability to defend its interests in the most vital regions, such as the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean, and the Western Pacific."

But what should the public be told we and our interests were being defended against? Why, an evil empire, of course! During the so-called Cold War, the communist conspiracy justification was so common that some very intelligent people believed U.S. war making couldn't go on without it. Here's Richard Barnet:

"The myth of monolithic Communism — that all activities of people everywhere who call themselves Communists or whom J. Edgar Hoover calls Communists are planned and controlled in the Kremlin — is essential to the ideology of the national security bureaucracy. Without it the President and his advisers would have a harder time identifying the enemy. They certainly could not find opponents worthy of the 'defense' efforts of the mightiest military power in the history of the world."

Ha! My apologies if you had any drink in your mouth and sprayed it on your clothing as you read that. As if the wars will not go on! As if the wars were not the reason for the communist threat, rather than the other way around! Writing in 1992, John Quigley could see this clearly:

“[T]he political reform that swept eastern Europe in 1989-90 left the cold war on the ash heap of history. Even so, our military interventions did not end. In 1989, we intervened to support a government in the Philippines and to overthrow one in Panama. In 1990, we sent a massive force to the Persian Gulf.

“The continuation of military interventions is not, however, surprising, because the aim all along... has been less to fight communism than to maintain our own control.”

The threat of the Soviet Union or communism was, within a dozen years replaced with the threat of al Qaeda or terrorism. Wars against an empire and an ideology would become wars against a small terrorist group and a tactic. The change had some advantages. While the Soviet Union could publicly collapse, a secretive and widely dispersed collection of terrorist cells to which we could apply the name al Qaeda could never be proven to have gone away. An ideology could fall out of favor, but anywhere we fought wars or imposed unwelcome control, people would fight back, and their fighting would be “terrorism” because it was directed against us. This was a new justification for never-ending war. But the motivation was the war, not the crusade to eliminate terrorism which crusade would, of course, produce more terrorism.

The motivation was U.S. control over areas of “vital interest,” namely profitable natural resources and markets and strategic positions for military bases from which to extend power over yet more resources and markets, and from which to deny any imaginable “rivals” anything resembling “American self-confidence.” This is, of course, aided and abetted by the motivations of those who profit financially from the war making itself.

#### FOR MONEY AND MARKETS

Economic motivations for wars are not exactly news. The most famous lines from Smedley Butler’s *War Is A Racket* are not actually in that book at all, but in a 1935 issue of the Socialist newspaper *Common Sense*, where he wrote:

“I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.”

This explanation of motives for wars was not usually presented in Butler's colorful language, but it wasn't secret either. In fact, war propagandists have long argued for portraying wars as beneficial to big business whether or not they actually would be:

"For the sake of the business men the war must appear as a profitable enterprise. L.G. Chiozza, Money, M.P., published a statement in the London Daily Chronicle for August 10th, 1914, which is a pattern for this sort of thing. He wrote:

"Our chief competitor both in Europe and outside it will be unable to trade, and at the conclusion of the War the unmistakable antagonism which German aggression is everywhere arousing will help us to keep the trade and shipping we will win from her."

To Carl von Clausewitz, who died in 1831, war was "a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means." That sounds about right, as long as we understand that war makers often have a preference for the means of war even when other means might achieve the same results. In an August 31st, 2010, Oval Office speech praising the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Obama exclaimed: "New markets for our goods stretch from Asia to the Americas!" In 1963, John Quigley, not yet an analyst of war lies, was a Marine assigned to lecture his unit on world affairs. When one of his students objected to the idea of fighting in Vietnam, Quigley "explained patiently that there was oil underneath Vietnam's continental shelf, that Vietnam's large population was an important market for our products, and that Vietnam commanded the sea route from the Middle East to the Far East."

But let's start at the beginning. Before he became president, William McKinley said "We want a foreign market for our surplus products." As president, he told Governor Robert LaFollette of Wisconsin he wanted "to attain U.S. supremacy in world markets." When Cuba was in danger of achieving its independence from Spain without assistance, McKinley persuaded Congress not to recognize the revolutionary government. After all, his goal was not Cuban independence, or Puerto Rican or Filipino independence. When he took over the Philippines, McKinley thought he was advancing the goal of "supremacy in world markets." When the people of the Philippines fought back, he called it an "insurrection." He described the war as a humanitarian mission for the Filipinos' own good. McKinley pioneered by saying first what later presidents would say as a matter of routine when engaged in wars for resources or markets.

A month before the United States entered World War I, on March 5, 1917, the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, Walter Hines Page, sent a cable to President Woodrow Wilson, reading in part:

"The pressure of this approaching crisis, I am certain, has gone beyond the ability of the Morgan financial agency for the British and French governments. The financial necessities of the Allies are too great and urgent for any private agency to handle, for every such agency has to encounter business rivalries and sectional antagonism. It is not improbable that the only way of maintaining our present preeminent trade position and averting a panic is by declaring war on Germany."

When peace had been made with Germany ending World War I, President Wilson kept U.S.

troops in Russia to fight the Soviets, despite earlier claims that our troops were in Russia in order to defeat Germany and intercept supplies bound for Germany. Senator Hiram Johnson (P., Calif.) had famously said of the launching of the war: "The first casualty when war comes, is truth." He now had something to say about the failure to end the war when the peace treaty had been signed. Johnson denounced the ongoing fighting in Russia and quoted from the Chicago Tribune when it claimed that the goal was to help Europe collect Russia's debt.

In 1935, considering the brewing financial interest in war with Japan, Norman Thomas pointed out that, at least from a national perspective, if not from the perspective of particular profiteers, it made no sense: "Our whole trade with Japan, China, and the Philippines in 1933 amounted to 525 million dollars or enough to have carried on the First World War for less than two and one-half days!"

Yes, he called it the "first" world war, because he saw what was coming. One year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, a State Department memo on Japanese expansionism said not a word about independence for China. But it did say:

". . . our general diplomatic and strategic position would be considerably weakened — by our loss of Chinese, Indian, and South Seas markets (and by our loss of much of the Japanese market for our goods, as Japan would become more and more self-sufficient) as well as by insurmountable restrictions upon our access to rubber, tin, jute, and other vital materials of the Asian and Oceanic regions."

During World War II, Secretary of State Cordell Hull chaired a "committee on political problems" which decided to handle perceived public fears that the United States would try to "feed, clothe, reconstruct, and police the world." The fears would be calmed by convincing the public that U.S. goals were to prevent another war and to provide "free access to raw materials and [foster] international commerce." The words of the Atlantic Charter ("equal access") became "free access," meaning access for the United States, but not necessarily for anybody else.

During the Cold War, the stated reasons for wars changed more than the real ones, as fighting communism gave cover for killing people to win markets, foreign labor, and resources. We said we were fighting for democracy, but we backed dictators like Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, and Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. The result was a bad name for the United States, and the empowering of leftist governments in reaction to our interference. Senator Frank Church (D., Idaho) concluded that we had "lost, or grievously impaired, the good name and reputation of the United States."

Even if war makers did not have economic motives, it would still be impossible for corporations not to see economic gains as fortuitous byproducts of wars. As George McGovern and William Polk noted in 2006: "In 2002, just before the American invasion [of Iraq], only one of the world's ten most profitable corporations was in the oil and gas field; in 2005 four of the ten were. They were Exxon-Mobil and Chevron Texaco (American) and Shell and BP (British). The Iraq war doubled the price of crude; it would go up another 50 percent during the first months of 2006."

FOR THE PROFITS



Profiting from the waging of war has been a common part of U.S. wars since at least the Civil War. During the 2003 War on Iraq Vice President Cheney directed massive no-bid contracts to a company, Halliburton, from which he was still receiving compensation, and profited from the same illegal war he defrauded the American public into launching. British Prime Minister Tony Blair was a little more circumspect in his war profiteering. The Stop the War Coalition kept up with him, however, writing in 2010:

“[Blair] earns £2 million a year for one day a month’s work, from the US investment bank J P Morgan, who just happen to be making huge profits from financing ‘reconstruction’ projects in Iraq. There’s no end of gratitude for Blair’s services to the oil industry, the Iraq invasion so clearly being aimed at controlling the world’s second largest oil reserves. The Kuwaiti Royal Family paid him around a million to produce a report on Kuwait’s future, and business deals through a consultancy he has set up to advise other countries in the Middle East are projected to earn around £5 million a year. Just in case he runs short, he has signed up with the South Korean oil firm UI Energy Corporation, which has extensive interests in Iraq and which some estimates say will eventually net him £20 million.”

## FOR MONEY AND CLASS

Another economic motivation for war that is often overlooked is the advantage war presents for a privileged class of people who are concerned that those denied a fair share of the nation’s wealth might rebel. In 1916 in the United States, socialism was gaining in popularity, while any sign of class struggle in Europe had been silenced by World War I. Senator James Wadsworth (R., N.Y.) proposed compulsory military training out of fear that “these people of ours shall be divided into classes.” The poverty draft may serve a similar function today. The American Revolution may have as well. World War II put a stop to depression-era radicalism that saw the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organizing black and white workers together.

World War II soldiers took their orders from Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower, and George Patton, men who in 1932 had led the military’s assault on the “Bonus Army,” World War I veterans camped out in Washington, D.C., pleading to be paid the bonuses they’d been promised. This was a struggle that looked like a failure until World War II veterans were given the GI Bill of Rights.

McCarthyism led many struggling for the rights of working people to place militarism ahead of their own struggles for the latter half of the twentieth century. Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in 1997:

“Americans credited the Gulf War with ‘bringing us together.’ Serbian and Croatian leaders solved their people’s post-communist economic discontents with an orgy of nationalist violence.”

I was working for low-income community groups on September 11, 2001, and I recall how all talk of a better minimum wage or more affordable housing went away in Washington when the war trumpets sounded.

## FOR OIL

A major motivation for wars is the seizing of control over other nations' resources. World War I made clear to war makers the importance of oil to fueling the wars themselves, as well as to fueling an industrial economy, and from that point forward a major motivation for war has been the conquest of nations that have supplies of oil. In 1940 the United States produced a majority (63 percent) of the world's oil, but in 1943 Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes said,

"If there should be a World War III it would have to be fought with someone else's petroleum, because the United States wouldn't have it."

President Jimmy Carter decreed in his last State of the Union address: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

Whether or not the first Gulf War was fought for oil, President George H. W. Bush said it was. He warned that Iraq would control too much of the world's oil if it invaded Saudi Arabia. The U.S. public denounced "blood for oil," and Bush quickly changed his tune. His son, attacking the same country a dozen years later, would allow his vice president to plan the war in secret meetings with oil executives, and would work hard to impose a "hydrocarbons law" on Iraq to benefit foreign oil companies, but he would not try to publicly sell the war as a mission to steal Iraqi oil. Or at least, that was not the primary focus of the sales pitch. There was a September 15, 2002, Washington Post headline that read "In Iraqi War Scenario, Oil Is Key Issue; U.S. Drillers Eye Huge Petroleum Pool."

Africom, the U.S. military's command structure for that seldom discussed chunk of land larger than all of North America, the African continent, was created by President George W. Bush in 2007. It had been envisioned a few years earlier, however, by the African Oil Policy Initiative Group (including representatives of the White House, Congress, and the oil corporations) as a structure "which could produce significant dividends in the protection of U.S. investments."<sup>169</sup> According to General Charles Wald, deputy commander of U.S. forces in Europe,

"A key mission for U.S. forces [in Africa] would be to insure that Nigeria's oilfields, which in the future could account for as much as 25 percent of all U.S. oil imports, are secure."

I wonder what he means by "secure." Somehow I doubt his concern is to boost the oilfields' self-confidence.

U.S. involvement in Yugoslavia in the 1990s was not unrelated to lead, zinc, cadmium, gold, and silver mines, cheap labor, and a deregulated market. In 1996 U.S. Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown died in a plane crash in Croatia along with top executives for Boeing, Bechtel, AT&T, Northwest Airlines, and several other corporations that were lining up government contracts for "reconstruction."<sup>171</sup> Enron, the famously corrupt corporation that would implode in 2001, was a part of so many such trips that it issued a press release to state that none of its people had been on this one. Enron gave \$100,000 to the Democratic National Committee in 1997, six days before accompanying new Commerce Secretary Mickey Kantor to Bosnia and Croatia and signing a deal to build a \$100 million power plant.



The annexation of Kosovo, Sandy Davies writes in *Blood on Our Hands*,

“...did succeed in creating a small militarized buffer state between Yugoslavia and the projected route of the AMBO oil pipeline through Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania. This pipeline is being built, with U.S. government support, to provide the United States and Western Europe with access to oil from the Caspian Sea....Energy Secretary Bill Richardson explained the underlying strategy in 1998. ‘This is about America’s energy security,’ he explained. ‘. . . It’s very important to us that both the pipeline map and the politics come out right.’”

Longtime master of war Zbigniew Brzezinski spoke at a RAND Corporation forum on Afghanistan in a Senate caucus room in October 2009. His first statement was that “withdrawal from Afghanistan in the near future is a No-No.” He offered no reasons why and suggested that his other statements would be more controversial.

During a subsequent question-and-answer period, I asked Brzezinski why such a statement should be considered uncontroversial when approximately half of Americans at that time opposed the occupation of Afghanistan. I asked how he would respond to the arguments of a U.S. diplomat who had just resigned in protest. Brzezinski responded that a lot of people are weak and don’t know any better, and they should be ignored. Brzezinski said one of the main goals for the War on Afghanistan was to build a north-south gas pipeline to the Indian Ocean. This didn’t noticeably shock anyone in the room.

In June 2010, a military-connected public relations firm persuaded the New York Times to run a front-page story proclaiming the discovery of vast mineral wealth in Afghanistan. Most of the claims were dubious, and those that were solid were not new. But the story had been planted at a time when senators and congress members were beginning to turn ever so slightly against the war. Apparently the White House or the Pentagon believed the possibility of stealing Afghans’ lithium would generate more war support in Congress.

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## FOR EMPIRE

Fighting for territory, whatever rocks may lie beneath it, is a venerable motivation for war. Up through World War I and including it, empires battled each other for various territories and colonies. In the case of World War I there were Alsace-Lorraine, the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East. Wars are also fought to assert influence rather than ownership in regions of the globe. The U.S. bombing of Yugoslavia in the 1990s may have involved a desire to keep Europe subordinate to the United States through NATO, an organization that was in danger

of losing its reason to exist.<sup>174</sup> A war can also be fought for the purpose of weakening another nation without occupying it. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft said one purpose of the Gulf War was to leave Iraq with “no offensive capability.” The United States’ success in this regard came in handy when it attacked Iraq again in 2003.

The Economist was concerned to keep the War on Afghanistan going in 2007: “Defeat would be a body blow not only to the Afghans, but to the NATO alliance.” The British Pakistani historian Tariq Ali commented: “As ever, geopolitics prevails over Afghan interests in the calculus of the big powers. The basing agreement signed by the U.S. with its appointee in Kabul in May 2005 gives the Pentagon the right to maintain a massive military presence in Afghanistan in perpetuity, potentially including nuclear missiles. That Washington is not seeking permanent bases in this fraught and inhospitable terrain simply for the sake of ‘democratization and good governance’ was made clear by NATO’s Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the Brookings Institution in February 2009: a permanent NATO presence in a country that borders the ex-Soviet republics, China, Iran, and Pakistan was too good to miss.”

## FOR THE GUNS

Another motivation for wars is the justification they provide for maintaining a large military and producing more weapons. This may have been a key motivation for various U.S. military actions following the Cold War. Talk of a peace dividend faded as wars and interventions proliferated. Wars also appear to be fought on occasion in a manner that allows the use of particular weapons even though the strategy makes no sense as a means to victory. In 1964, for example, U.S. war makers decided to bomb North Vietnam even though their intelligence told them the resistance in the South was home grown.

Why? Possibly because bombs were what they had to work with and — for whatever other reasons — they wanted war. As we’ve seen above, nuclear bombs were dropped unnecessarily on Japan, the second one even more unnecessarily than the first. That second one was a different type of bomb, a plutonium bomb, and the Pentagon wanted to see it tested. World War II in Europe had drawn to a close with a completely unnecessary U.S. bombing of the French town of Royan — again despite the French being our allies. This bombing was an early use of napalm on human beings, and the Pentagon apparently wanted to see what it would do.

## MACHISMO

But men cannot live by bread alone. Wars fought against a global menace (communism, terrorism, or another) are also wars fought to display one’s prowess to bystanders, thus preventing the toppling of dominoes — a danger that can always be precipitated by a loss of “credibility.” Remarkably, in warmongerspeak “credibility” is a synonym for “bellicosity,” not “honesty.” Thus, nonviolent approaches to the world lack not only violence but also “credibility.” There is something indecent about them. According to Richard Barnett,

“Military officers in the [Lyndon] Johnson Administration consistently argued the risks of defeat and humiliation were greater than the risks of mining Haiphong, obliterating Hanoi, or bombing ‘selected targets’ in China.”

They knew the world would be outraged by such actions, but somehow there is nothing

humiliating about the prospect of being ostracized as murderous madmen. Only softness can be humiliating.

One of the most dramatic news stories that came out of Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers was the news that 70 percent of the motivation of the people behind the War on Vietnam was "to save face." It wasn't to keep the communists out of Peoria or to teach the Vietnamese democracy or anything so grand. It was to protect the image, or perhaps the self-image, of the war makers themselves. Assistant Secretary of "Defense" John McNaughton's March 24, 1965, memo said U.S. goals in horrifically bombing the people of Vietnam were 70 percent "to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as guarantor)," 20 percent to keep territory out of Chinese hands, and 10 percent to permit people a "better, freer way of life."

McNaughton was concerned that other nations, wondering whether or not the United States would have the toughness to bomb the hell out of them too, might ask questions like:

"Is the U.S. hobbled by restraints which might be relevant in future cases (fear of illegality, of U.N., of neutral reaction, of domestic pressures, of U.S. losses, of deploying U.S. ground forces in Asia, of war with China or Russia, of use of nuclear weapons, etc.)?"

That's a lot to prove you're not afraid of. But then we did drop a lot of bombs on Vietnam trying to prove it, over 7 million tons, as compared to the 2 million dropped in World War II. Ralph Stavins argues in *Washington Plans an Aggressive War* that John McNaughton and William Bundy understood that only withdrawal from Vietnam made sense, but backed escalation out of fear of seeming personally weak.

In 1975, after defeat in Vietnam, the masters of war were even touchier about their machismo than usual. When the Khmer Rouge seized a U.S.- registered merchant vessel, President Gerald Ford demanded the release of the ship and its crew. The Khmer Rouge complied. But U.S. jet fighters went ahead and bombed Cambodia as a means of showing that, as the White House put it, the United States "still stood ready to meet force with force to protect its interests."

Such displays of toughness are understood in Washington, D.C., to not only advance careers but also to enhance reputations in perpetuity. Presidents have long believed they could not be remembered as great presidents without wars. Theodore Roosevelt wrote to a friend in 1897, "In strict confidence...I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one."

According to novelist and author Gore Vidal, President John Kennedy told him that a president needed a war for greatness and that without the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln would have been just another railroad lawyer. According to Mickey Herskowitz, who had worked with George W. Bush in 1999 on the latter's "autobiography," Bush wanted a war before becoming president. One disturbing thing about all this longing for war is that, while many of the motivations seem base, greedy, foolish, and despicable, some of them seem very personal and psychological. Perhaps it's "rational" to want world markets to buy U.S. products and to produce them more cheaply, but why must we have "supremacy in world markets?" Why do we collectively need "self-confidence?" Isn't that something each individual person finds on their own? Why the emphasis on "preeminence"? Why is there so

little talk in the back rooms about being protected from foreign threats and so much about dominating foreigners with our superiority and fearsome “credibility”? Is war about being respected?

When you combine the illogic of these motivations for war with the fact that wars so often fail on their own terms and yet are repeated time and time again, it becomes possible to doubt that the masters of war are always masters of their own consciousness. The United States did not conquer Korea or Vietnam or Iraq or Afghanistan. Historically, empires have not lasted. In a rational world we would skip the wars and go straight to the peace negotiations that follow them. Yet, so often, we do not.

During the War on Vietnam, the United States apparently began the air war, began the ground war, and proceeded with each step of escalation because the war planners couldn't think of anything else to do other than ending the war, and despite their high confidence that what they were doing would not work. After a lengthy period during which these expectations were fulfilled, they did what they could have done from the start and ended the war.

*David Swanson* is the author of “War Is A Lie” from which this is excerpted:  
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