

## 'Hard Truths for Hard Times'

By [Chris Floyd](#)

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Rarely has the imperial hubris that lies at the basis of U.S. foreign policy — the unspoken, unquestioned assumption of America's right to global domination by force — been so nakedly revealed than in the recent Washington Post story decrying the degraded state of the Pentagon's military preparedness. ("Military is Ill-Prepared for Other Conflicts.") What makes the story so remarkable, and so valuable as a diagnostic tool for the health of the Republic (which could perhaps be most accurately described as "the sickness unto death") is that none of the generals or politicians quoted in the story — nor the writer herself — betray the slightest awareness of the moral obscenity upon which all their earnest concerns and diligent fact-finding are based.

On its surface, at the level of meaning it intends to convey to readers, the story is disturbing enough. The upshot is that Bush's reckless and stupid war of aggression in Iraq has plunged American military stocks and manpower reserves into a "death spiral" of depletion that will take years — and untold billions of dollars — to replenish. This in turn has put the United States in a horribly exposed strategic position, with the Pentagon incapable of responding "quickly and decisively to potential foreign crises," as the Post puts it. For example, the Army no longer has even a single brigade "ready to deploy within hours to an overseas hot spot," we're told. The highest brass — Joint Chief Chairman Gen. Peter Pace, Army chief of staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker, and his vice chief, Gen. Richard Cody — attest, under oath, to the woeful state of unreadiness. Anonymous "senior officers" interviewed by the reporter then make clear the implications of their bosses' plaintive but coded warnings: the Iraq War is bleeding us dry.

On the second level of meaning — which the reporter may or may not have consciously intended to put across — we find something equally disturbing. Note well what the nation's top military officer, General Pace, has to say about this state of unreadiness:

"In earlier House testimony, Pace said the military, using the Navy, Air Force and reserves, could handle one of three major contingencies, involving North Korea or — although he did not name them — Iran or China. But, he said, 'It will not be as precise as we would like, nor will it be on the timelines that we would prefer, because we would then, while engaged in one fight, have to reallocate resources and remobilize the Guard and reserves.'"

The true import here is not so much the casualness with which these Beltway players — the generals, the legislators and the reporters — regard the prospect of war with North Korea, Iran and China as an unavoidable natural fact, something that is bound to happen sooner or later, and for which we must be massively steeled. This attitude is troubling, of course, but it's hardly news. No, what gives cause for the greatest immediate concern in Pace's remarks is his observation that in a coming "major contingency" — such as the all-but-inevitable attack on Iran — the Pentagon's campaign "will not be as precise as we would like." What is

this but a tacit admission that when push comes to shove with Tehran, the United States will have to go in with a sledgehammer, lashing out left and right — no “surgical strike” against alleged nuclear facilities, but a blunderbuss assault, with the attendant “collateral damage” and destruction of civilian infrastructure that we have seen in Iraq (twice), Kosovo, Panama, Vietnam and other “contingencies.”

Again, all of this is bad enough in itself. But it is the third level of meaning — never expressed either directly or indirectly but embodied by the story as a whole — that is the most profoundly disturbing. The present state of affairs leaves the nation at grave risk, we are told. Why? Because it leaves the United States somewhat hobbled in its ability to impose its will military on any nation or region it so chooses. Again, attend to General Pace as he tells Congress that he is “not comfortable” with the Army’s readiness:

“You take a lap around the globe — you could start any place: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Venezuela, Colombia, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, North Korea, back around to Pakistan, and I probably missed a few. There’s no dearth of challenges out there for our armed forces,’ Pace warned in his testimony.”

This is not the statement of a military officer serving in the armed forces of a democratic republic devoted to the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness of its citizens. This is the action list of a Roman general seeking more funds so that he might fulfill Caesar’s commands for further conquests and punitive raids beyond the frontiers of the Empire. Nation after nation, in every corner of the globe, is laid out for possible military intervention — “and I probably missed a few.” And the legislators — of both parties — who heard these dire warnings merely nodded their heads in solemn agreement: the United States must be ready at all times to strike with massive force at short notice anywhere and everywhere in the world.

Not as single Congressional official — or the reporter — ever asked the simple question: Why? Why must we be prepared to invade or intervene in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Somalia, Sudan, Venezuela, Colombia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan at the drop of a hat, with at least an Army brigade’s worth of troops backed up by air and naval power? In what way does the maintenance and expansion of a military establishment that has, as Chalmers Johnson notes, some “737 bases in more than 130 countries around the world” and the capacity for assaulting every other nation on earth advance the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness of the American people? Because it “combats terrorism”? But the vast majority of the Pentagon’s international empire was constructed long before this most elastic abstract noun became the bogeyman of America’s night-mind. Most of it was built in the name of “fighting communism,” that former all-devouring bogeyman who has now retired to shabby pensioner’s digs in Havana.

But of course, these earlier outposts of empire were actually devoted to the same aim as the new imperial fortresses going up in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa: to assert American dominance of global political and economic affairs, to enrich politically connected American contractors (and the pols who grease them so diligently with public money), and to prevent the rise of any possible alternative systems in foreign countries that might adversely affect the power, privilege and profits of the American elite and their local collaborators. (And any such system, whether it was based on Marxism or — as was most often the case — not, was reflexively labeled “communism” and its adherents dehumanized, dispossessed, incarcerated or simply killed. The history of El Salvador during the Reagan-Bush administrations is but one example. And this demonization was the case even with the

“liberation theology” advanced by anti-communist Catholic churchmen in Latin America — a movement so dangerous to the corrupt status quo that it is still being actively quashed today by the former head of the Inquisition, Pope Benedict.)

Here again, Chalmers Johnson is instructive. In a recent interview with Buzzflash.com, he notes:

“...History tells us there’s no more unstable, critical configuration than the combination of domestic democracy and foreign empire. You can be one or the other. You can be a democratic country, as we have claimed in the past to be, based on our Constitution. Or you can be an empire. But you can’t be both...The causative issue is militarism. Imperialism, by definition, requires military force. It requires huge standing armies. It requires a large military-industrial complex. It requires the willingness to use force regularly. Imperialism is a pure form of tyranny. It never rules through consent, any more than we do in Iraq today.”

Imagine the uproar in Washington if the leading Chinese papers reported that the Red Army’s top general had appeared before the Politburo and gave them a “trot around the globe,” detailing, by name, the many nations that China must be able to attack at a moment’s notice. Or asserted that China must be able to install and maintain hundreds of military bases all over the world to protect its interests. Or if Putin’s top general told the Duma this. Or if Iran’s military leaders declared that they too were going to place military bases in 130 countries and raise a military force capable of meeting “contingencies” in a range of specific countries — with the proviso, of course, that they “may have missed a few” potential targets for military action. And all of this, of course, cloaked in the rhetoric of justified defense, of helping others, of peace, prosperity and security for all humankind.

What an outcry we would hear from the White House, from Congress, from the media: “The arrogance of these foreign devils! The rank hypocrisy, gussying up their unbridled aggression, their naked greed, with flowery phrases! Why should they need such a vast military establishment — which goes far beyond the necessary requirements of defending their people — except to impose their will upon other nations? These ruthless military ambitions will destabilize the entire planet, set off frantic arms races, spark wars, sow mistrust, foment terrorism, drive millions into want and ruin. We won’t stand for this kind of domination!”

Yet it was precisely this aggression, this greed, this ruthless ambition that was on full display in the generals’ Congressional testimony, and the Washington Post article. And we wonder why the other nations of the world mistrust us. We wonder why they would even try — in their own small, pitiful ways — to arm themselves against us. We wonder why they denounce our policies, our benevolent interventions, our cruise missiles, our bombs, our checkpoints, our house raids, our renditions, our secret prisons, our unfortunate infliction of collateral damage — all of which are devoted solely to justified defense, to helping others, to the peace, prosperity and security of all humankind.

Gen. Pace is famously concerned with morality, as he demonstrated last week with his stern denunciation of homosexuality. The idea of two people of the same gender giving pleasure to one another outrages and sickens him. But the obscenity of visiting death and suffering on dozens of countries who have not attacked the United States; of killing, maiming and despoiling multitudes of innocent people who pose no threat to the United States; of bankrupting the people of the United States and utterly corrupting the Republic of the United States in the service of a rampant militarist empire — this doesn’t trouble General

Pace, or Congress, or the arbiters of our national discourse such as the Washington Post, in the least.

*Chris Floyd is the Editor and co-founder of Atlantic Free Press. He is an American journalist now based in Great Britain and the UK correspondent for Truthout.org. For 10 years, he wrote the weekly Global Eye political column for The Moscow Times and St. Petersburg Times. His writings also appear in The Nation, Columbia Journalism Review, The Baltimore Chronicle, The Bergen Record and elsewhere around the world. His book, Empire Burlesque, is published by Expathos Books.*

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