

Meet the New Imperial Court, Same As the Old Imperial Court

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One of the mistakes that foreigners make about the United States, millions of Americans make themselves with much less justification: they overestimate the difference between members of the Democratic and Republican Parties in Washington, D.C.

The two parties scream at each other on television quite a lot and attract supporters who come from two very different cultures. But over half of every dollar of income tax in the United States is spent on the military, and that number reliably increases every single year regardless of who is in power.

The Afghan and Iraq wars were launched with overwhelming support from both parties' officials, and the Iraq War with Democratic control of the Senate. In 2006 U.S. voters told exit-pollsters that their primary motivation for electing Democrats to control both houses of Congress was Iraq war opposition, and Congress proceeded in 2007 to escalate the war on Iraq. War opposition also drove the 2008 elections, after which two Democratic houses and a Democratic president in 2009 escalated the war on Afghanistan.

Americans tell pollsters that ending the wars is their second highest priority after repairing the U.S. economy. (How many understand the close relationship between the two, the wars' negative impact on the domestic economy, is not clear.) Majorities think the Afghan and Iraq wars should never have been launched, but majorities supported launching them at the time in 2001 and 2003. Electing Democrats to act on the will of the new majority has been tried and failed, and now the House is going back to Republican control.

There will be no gridlock on matters of war and foreign relations (two areas that are identical in the understanding of the U.S. government, as made clear by the cables leaked to Wikileaks). To the extent that a minority of Democrats in the House will object to anything on the military's agenda, it will not matter as the President and the Republicans are in complete agreement. In fact, Congress may seek to pass a new "Authorization to Use Military Force" that would strengthen any president's unconstitutional power to wage wars, without any purported connection to the crimes of September 11, 2001, as required by the routinely violated AUMF of 2001. The new bill may also license unconstitutional presidential violations of civil liberties during "war time," a state of affairs that is now understood to be without spatial or temporal limit. Republicans are principled supporters of presidential war powers even when they despise the current president.

Oddly, given these trends of consistent bipartisan support for ever more militarism, the idea of decreasing military spending by \$100 billion or more (out of \$1 trillion or so per year) is prominently in discussion among elites in Washington right now in a way that we haven't

seen in 20 years. The reason is not an understanding of the illegality or immorality of what the war machine does. It is not a realization of the dangers created by weapons sales, nuclear proliferation, and the blowback generated by aggressive wars. It is not recognition of the perilous environmental situation exacerbated by the U.S. military, the world's leading consumer of petroleum. The reason, amazingly, is that rightwing groups in Washington have turned the federal budget deficit into as evil a demon as any foreign dictator of an oil-rich land. Even the president's "Deficit Commission" is recommending major military cutbacks. Its commissioners have asked for a one-third reduction in foreign military bases.

Congress is extremely unlikely to diverge from its path of ever increasing Pentagon expenditures unless a massive public movement pressures it to do so. In 2006 an anti-war movement had gained such popular strength that the Republican minority leader of the Senate Mitch McConnell, according to former president George W. Bush's new book, secretly urged the president to pull the troops out of Iraq. But in 2006 organizations in the United States that take their direction from the Democratic Party were opposing the War on Iraq, because the war was understood to be a Republican war and to be very unpopular. Now the wars are Democratic wars or Bipartisan wars, and the opposition comes only from the principled but under-funded peace groups.

While the White House and the Senate remain in Democratic hands, the House will be Republican-controlled in January, and all of the House committee chairs will be Republicans. This will mean the first aggressive oversight of the U.S. government since the War on Iraq began. Thus far we have had Republican committees overlook the crimes and abuses of the Bush-Cheney regime, Democratic committees pretend to investigate Bush-Cheney but actually abandon the powers of subpoena and impeachment without a struggle, and Democratic committees overlook the crimes and abuses of the Obama White House. Sadly, we will now have Republican committee chairs investigate all the wrong things for all the wrong reasons, bringing back the structure of congressional oversight without actually handling the issues that most need to be addressed. Rather than investigating crimes exposed by Wikileaks, for example, the new House Judiciary Committee will likely offer its rhetorical support for any Justice Department effort to prosecute the media outlet for the crime of journalism.

Congress is likely to pass a 2011 military funding package that includes \$160 billion for wars. That is likely to be insufficient. When a "supplemental" spending bill (kept off the books to make the budget look better) is brought up in 2012, we may see a record number of congress members vote against it. The number of members voting No has increased steadily to a high point of 114 this past July (with 218 needed for a majority). Democrats may vote No because the Republican leadership will not offer them — as Democrats did — doomed anti-war amendments to vote Yes on before voting Yes on the funding; because popular opposition to the war is on the rise; because congress members are always more willing to vote No on bills that are guaranteed to pass; and because the Democrats in the House may start running away from President Obama. If this happens, the war bills will pass easily every time, just as always, regardless of party. But the wars will come to be seen as a collaboration between the Republicans and the President, with the majority of the Democrats opposed. This scenario could lead to a Democratic Congress and a Republican President in 2012.

But Obama's reelection strategy might be the development of a new war in mid-2012. It's hard to see what other strategy he could have, given his energetic alienation of all of his supporters on domestic issues. That could be very bad news for some unfortunate country,

and Iran is certainly high on the list. It would also be very bad news for the rest of the world.

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