

The Planet Cannot Heal Until We Rip the Mask Off the West's War Machine

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, November 30, 2020

Making political sense of the world can be tricky unless one understands the role of the state in capitalist societies. The state is not primarily there to represent voters or uphold democratic rights and values; it is a vehicle for facilitating and legitimating the concentration of wealth and power into fewer and fewer hands.

In a [recent post](#), I wrote about “externalities” – the ability of companies to offset the true costs inherent in the production process. The burden of these costs are covertly shifted on to wider society: that is, on to you and me. Or on to those far from view, in foreign lands. Or on to future generations. Externalising costs means that profits can be maximised for the wealth elite in the here and now.

My latest: The increasingly desperate task of capitalism's perception managers is to dissociate our economic system from the emerging environmental crisis - to break our understanding of the causal link between the two
<https://t.co/S4Aby314FX>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [October 25, 2020](#)

Our own societies must deal with the externalised costs of industries ranging from tobacco and alcohol to chemicals and vehicles. Societies abroad must deal with the costs of the bombs dropped by our “defence” industries. And future generations will have to deal with the lethal costs incurred by corporations that for decades have been allowed to pump out their waste products into every corner of the globe.

Divine right to rule

In the past, the job of the corporate media was to shield those externalities from public view. More recently, as the costs have become impossible to ignore, especially with the climate crisis looming, the media’s role has changed. Its central task now is to obscure corporate responsibility for these externalities. That is hardly surprising. After all, the corporate media’s profits depend on externalising costs too, as well as hiding the externalised costs of their parent companies, their billionaire owners and their advertisers.

Once, monarchs rewarded the clerical class for persuading, through the doctrine of divine right, their subjects to passively submit to exploitation. Today, “mainstream” media are there to persuade us that capitalism, the profit motive, the accumulation of ever greater wealth by elites, and externalities destroying the planet are the natural order of things, that this is the best economic model imaginable.

Most of us are now so propagandised by the media that we can barely imagine a functioning world without capitalism. Our minds are primed to imagine, in the absence of capitalism, an immediate lurch back to Soviet-style bread queues or an evolutionary reversal to cave-dwelling. Those thoughts paralyse us, making us unable to contemplate what might be wrong or inherently unsustainable about how we live right now, or to imagine the suicidal future we are hurtling towards.

Lifblood of empire

There is a reason that, as we rush lemming-like towards the cliff-edge, urged on by a capitalism that cannot operate at the level of sustainability or even of sanity, the push towards intensified war grows. Wars are the lifblood of the corporate empire headquartered in the United States.

My latest: The new documentary on Greta Thunberg - I Am Greta - isn't about climate change. It's about something even more important: the elusiveness of sanity in an insane world <https://t.co/uU2G6i821I>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [November 17, 2020](#)

US imperialism is no different from earlier imperialisms in its aims or methods. But in late-stage capitalism, wealth and power are hugely concentrated. Technologies have reached a pinnacle of advancement. Disinformation and propaganda are sophisticated to an unprecedented degree. Surveillance is intrusive and aggressive, if well concealed. Capitalism's destructive potential is unlimited. But even so, war's appeal is not diminished.

As ever, wars allow for the capture and control of resources. Fossil fuels promise future growth, even if of the short-term, unsustainable kind.

Wars require the state to invest its money in the horrendously expensive and destructive products of the "defence" industries, from fighter planes to bombs, justifying the transfer of yet more public resources into private hands.

The lobbies associated with these "defence" industries have every incentive to push for aggressive foreign (and domestic) policies to justify more investment, greater expansion of "defensive" capabilities, and the use of weapons on the battlefield so that they need replenishing.

Whether public or covert, wars provide an opportunity to remake poorly defended, resistant societies - such as Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria - in ways that allow for resources to be seized, markets to be expanded and the reach of the corporate elite to be extended.

War is the ultimate growth industry, limited only by our ability to be persuaded of new enemies and new threats.

Fog of war

For the political class, the benefits of war are not simply economic. In a time of environmental collapse, war offers a temporary "Get out of jail" card. During wars, the public is encouraged to assent to new, ever greater sacrifices that allow public wealth to be

transferred to the elite. War is the corporate world's ultimate Ponzi scheme.

The "fog of war" does not just describe the difficulty of knowing what is happening in the immediate heat of battle. It is also the fear, generated by claims of an existential threat, that sets aside normal thinking, normal caution, normal scepticism. It is the invoking of a phantasmagorical enemy towards which public resentments can be directed, shielding from view the real culprits - the corporations and their political cronies at home.

The "fog of war" engineers the disruption of established systems of control and protocol to cope with the national emergency, shrouding and rationalising the accumulation by corporations of more wealth and power and the further capture of organs of the state. It is the licence provided for "exceptional" changes to the rules that quickly become normalised. It is the disinformation that passes for national responsibility and patriotism.

Permanent austerity

All of which explains why Boris Johnson, Britain's prime minister, has just [pledged](#) an extra £16.5 billion in "defence" spending at a time when the UK is struggling to control a pandemic and when, faced by disease, Brexit and a new round of winter floods, the British economy is facing "systemic crisis", according to a new Cabinet Office report. Figures released last week [show](#) the biggest economic contraction in the UK in three centuries.

If the British public is to stomach yet more cuts, to surrender to permanent austerity as the economy tanks, Johnson, ever the populist, knows he needs a good cover story. And that will involve further embellishment of existing, fearmongering narratives about Russia, Iran and China.

To make those narratives plausible, Johnson has to act as if the threats are real, which means massive spending on "defence". Such expenditure, wholly counter-productive when the current challenge is sustainability, will line the pockets of the very corporations that help Johnson and his pals stay in power, not least by cheerleading him via their media arms.

New salesman needed

The cynical way this works was underscored in a classified 2010 CIA memorandum, known as "Red Cell", leaked to Wikileaks, as the journalist Glenn Greenwald reminded us last week. The CIA memo [addressed](#) the fear in Washington that European publics were demonstrating little appetite for the US-led "war on terror" that followed 9/11. That, in turn, risked limiting the ability of European allies to support the US as it exercised its divine right to wage war.

The memo notes that European support for US wars after 9/11 had chiefly relied on "public apathy" - the fact that Europeans were kept largely ignorant by their own media of what those wars entailed. But with a rising tide of anti-war sentiment, the concern was that this might change. There was an urgent need to further manipulate public opinion more decisively in favour of war.

The US intelligence agency decided its wars needed a facelift. George W Bush, with his Texan, cowboy swagger, had proved a poor salesman. So the CIA turned to identity politics and faux "humanitarianism", which they believed would play better with European publics.

Part of the solution was to accentuate the suffering of Afghan women to justify war. But the other part was to use President Barack Obama as the face of a new, "caring" approach to

war. He had recently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – even though he had done nothing for peace, and would go on to expand US wars – very possibly as part of this same effort to reinvent the “war on terror”. Polls showed support for existing wars increased markedly among Europeans when they were reminded that Obama backed these wars.

As Greenwald [observes](#):

“Obama’s most important value was in prettifying, marketing and prolonging wars, not ending them. They saw him for what U.S. Presidents really are: instruments to create a brand and image about the U.S. role in the world that can be effectively peddled to both the domestic population in the U.S. and then on the global stage, and specifically to pretend that endless barbaric U.S. wars are really humanitarian projects benevolently designed to help people – the pretext used to justify every war by every country in history.”

Obama-style facelift

Once the state is understood as a vehicle for entrenching elite power – and war its most trusted tool for concentrating power – the world becomes far more intelligible. Western economies never stopped being colonial economies, but they were given an Obama-style facelift. War and plunder – even when they masquerade as “defence”, or peace – are still the core western mission.

That is why Britons, believing days of empire are long behind them, might have been shocked to learn last week that the UK still operates 145 military bases in 42 countries around the globe, meaning it runs the second largest network of such bases after the US.

Such information is not made available in the UK “mainstream” media, of course. It has to be provided by an “alternative” investigative site, Declassified UK. In that way the vast majority of the British public are left clueless about how their taxes are being used at a time when they are told further belt-tightening is essential.

REVEALED — The UK military’s overseas base network involves 145 sites in 42 countries.

The results of a months-long investigation by [@pmillerinfo](#) <https://t.co/oaffNnJZc>

— Declassified UK (@declassifiedUK) [November 24, 2020](#)

The UK’s network of bases, many of them in the Middle East, close to the world’s largest oil reserves, are what the much-vaunted “special relationship” with the US amounts to. Those bases are the reason the UK – whoever is prime minister – is never going to say “no” to a demand that Britain join Washington in waging war, as it did in attacking Iraq in 2003, or in aiding attacks on Libya, Syria and Yemen. The UK is not only a satellite of the US empire, it is a lynchpin of the western imperial war economy.

Ideological alchemy

Once that point is appreciated, the need for external enemies – for our own [Eurasias and](#)

[Eastasias](#) - becomes clearer.

Some of those enemies, the minor ones, come and go, as demand dictates. Iraq dominated western attention for two decades. Now it has served its purpose, its killing fields and "terrorist" recruiting grounds have reverted to a mere footnote in the daily news. Likewise, the Libyan bogeyman Muammar Gaddafi was constantly paraded across news pages until he was bayoneted to death. Now the horror story that is today's chaotic Libya, a corridor for arms-running and people-trafficking, can be safely ignored. For a decade, the entirely unexceptional Arab dictator Bashar Assad, of Syria, has been elevated to the status of a new Hitler, and he will continue to serve in that role for as long as it suits the needs of the western war economy.

Notably, Israel, another lynchpin of the US empire and one that serves as a kind of offshored weapons testing laboratory for the military-industrial complex, has played a vital role in rationalising these wars. Just as saving Afghan women from Middle Eastern patriarchy makes killing Afghans - men, women and children - more palatable to Europeans, so destroying Arab states can be presented as a humanitarian gesture if at the same time it crushes Israel's enemies, and by extension, through a strange, implied ideological alchemy, the enemies of all Jews.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi arrests show crown prince is a risk-taker with a zeal for reform

Mohammed bin Salman is confronting some of the kingdom's richest and most powerful men in his anti-corruption drive - but is he taking on too much too fast?

Patrick Wintour
Diplomatic editor

Sun 5 Nov 2017 14:52
GMT



Quite how opportunistic - and divorced from reality - the western discourse about Israel and the Middle East has become is obvious the moment the relentless concerns about Syria's Assad are weighed against the casual indifference towards the head-chopping rulers of Saudi Arabia, who for decades have been financing terror groups across the Middle East, including the jihadists in Syria.

During that time, Israel has covertly allied with oil-rich Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states,

because all of them are safely ensconced within the US war machine. Now, with the Palestinians completely sidelined diplomatically, and with all international solidarity with Palestinians browbeaten into silence by antisemitism smears, Israel and the Saudis are gradually going public with their alliance, like a pair of shy lovers. That included the convenient leak this week of a [secret meeting](#) between Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi ruler Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia.

Israel's likely reward is contained in a [new bill](#) in Congress for even more military aid than the record \$3.8 billion Israel currently receives annually from the US - at a time when the US economy, like the UK one, is in dire straits.

My latest: Pompeo's declaration that criticism of Israel and the peaceful movement urging a boycott of its settlements are 'antisemitic' marks the logical endpoint of a foreign policy consensus rapidly taking shape in the US and Europe <https://t.co/OfLC8TKnzm>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [November 24, 2020](#)

The west also needs bigger, more menacing and more permanent enemies than Iraq or Syria. Helpfully one kind - nebulous "terrorism" - is the inevitable reaction to western war-making. The more brown people we kill, the more brown people we can justify killing because they carry out, or support, "terrorism" against us. Their hatred for our bombs is an irrationality, a primitivism we must keep stamping out with more bombs.

But concrete, identifiable enemies are needed too. Russia, Iran and China give superficial credence to the war machine's presentation of itself as a "defence" industry. The UK's bases around the globe and Boris Johnson's £16.5 billion rise in spending on the UK's war industries only make sense if Britain is under a constant, existential threat. Not just someone with a suspicious backpack on the London Tube, but a sophisticated, fiendish enemy that threatens to invade our lands, to steal resources to which we claim exclusive rights, to destroy our way of life through its masterful manipulation of the internet.

Crushed or tamed

Anyone of significance who questions these narratives that rationalise and perpetuate war is the enemy too. Current political and legal dramas in the US and UK reflect the perceived threat such actors pose to the war machine. They must either be crushed or tamed into subservience.

Trump was initially just such a figure that needed breaking in. The CIA and other intelligence agencies assisted in the organised opposition to Trump - helping to fuel the evidence-free Russiagate "scandal" - not because he was an awful human being or had authoritarian tendencies, but for two more specific reasons.

First, Trump's political impulses, expressed in the early stages of his presidential campaign, were to withdraw from the very wars the US empire depends on. Despite open disdain for him from most of the media, he was criticised more often for *failing to prosecute wars* enthusiastically enough rather than for being too hawkish. And second, even as his isolationist impulses were largely subdued after the 2016 election by the permanent bureaucracy and his own officials, Trump proved to be an even more disastrous salesman

for war than George W Bush. Trump made war look and sound exactly as it is, rather than packaging it as “intervention” intended to help women and people of colour.

But Trump’s amateurish isolationism paled in comparison to two far bigger threats to the war machine that emerged over the past decade. One was the danger – in our newly interconnected, digital world – of information leaks that risked stripping away the mask of US democracy, of the “shining city on the hill”, to reveal the tawdry reality underneath.

Julian Assange and his Wikileaks project proved just such a danger. The most memorable leak – at least as far as the general public was concerned – occurred in 2010, with publication of a classified video, titled Collateral Murder, showing a US air crew joking and celebrating as they murdered civilians far below in the streets of Baghdad. It gave a small taste of why western “humanitarianism” might prove so unpopular with those to whom we were busy supposedly bringing “democracy”.

The threat posed by Assange’s new transparency project was recognised instantly by US officials.

Exhibiting a carefully honed naivety, the political and media establishments have sought to uncouple the fact that Assange has spent most of the last decade in various forms of detention, and is currently locked up in a London high-security prison awaiting extradition to the US, from his success in exposing the war machine. Nonetheless, to ensure his incarceration till death in one of its super-max jails, the US empire has had to conflate the accepted definitions of “journalism” and “espionage”, and radically overhaul traditional understandings of the rights enshrined in the First Amendment.

My latest: Julian Assange was on the front line of a war to remake journalism as a true check on the runaway power of government. Journalists had a chance to ally with him. Instead they served him up as a sacrificial offering to their corporate masters <https://t.co/oF2nPOix49>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [September 2, 2020](#)

Dress rehearsal for a coup

An equally grave threat to the war machine was posed by the emergence of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of Britain’s Labour party. Corbyn presented as exceptional a problem as Assange.

Before Corbyn, Labour had never seriously challenged the UK’s dominant military-industrial complex, even if its support for war back in the 1960s and 1970s was often tempered by its then-social democratic politics. It was in this period, at the height of the Cold War, that Labour prime minister Harold Wilson was suspected by British elites of failing to share their anti-Communist and anti-Soviet paranoia, and was therefore viewed as a potential threat to their entrenched privileges.

As a BBC dramatised documentary from 2006 notes, Wilson [faced](#) the very real prospect of enforced “regime change”, coordinated by the military, the intelligence services and

members of the royal family. It culminated in a show of force by the military as they briefly took over Heathrow airport without warning or coordination with Wilson's government. Marcia Williams, his secretary, called it a "dress rehearsal" for a coup. Wilson resigned unexpectedly soon afterwards, apparently as the pressure started to take its toll.

'Mutiny' by the army

Subsequent Labour leaders, most notably Tony Blair, learnt the Wilson lesson: never, ever take on the "defence" establishment. The chief role of the UK is to serve as the US war machine's attack dog. Defying that allotted role would be political suicide.

By contrast to Wilson, who posed a threat to the British establishment only in its overheated imagination, Corbyn was indeed a real danger to the militaristic status quo.

He was one of the founders of the Stop the War coalition that emerged specifically to challenge the premises of the "war on terror". He explicitly demanded an end to Israel's role as a forward base of the imperial war industries. In the face of massive opposition from his own party - and claims he was undermining "national security" - Corbyn urged a public debate about the deterrence claimed by the "defence" establishment for the UK's Trident nuclear submarine programme, effectively under US control. It was also clear that Corbyn's socialist agenda, were he ever to reach power, would require redirecting the many billions spent in maintaining the UK's 145 military bases around the globe back into domestic social programmes.

In an age when the primacy of capitalism goes entirely unquestioned, Corbyn attracted even more immediate hostility from the power establishment than Wilson had. As soon as he was elected Labour leader, Corbyn's own MPs - still loyal to Blairism - sought to oust him with a failed leadership challenge. If there was any doubt about how the power elite responded to Corbyn becoming head of the opposition, the Rupert Murdoch-owned Sunday Times newspaper soon offered a platform to an unnamed army general to make clear its concerns.

Weeks after Corbyn's election as Labour leader, the general [warned](#) that the army would take "direct action" using "whatever means possible, fair or foul" to prevent Corbyn exercising power. There would be "mutiny", he said. "The Army just wouldn't stand for it."

My latest: Corbyn's election to lead the Labour party didn't overturn the rigged political system or end the corporate chokehold on power. His victory was an accident, and the system has been fighting back with all its might to correct the error ever since <https://t.co/2u0Vyo0qLU>

— Jonathan Cook (@Jonathan_K_Cook) [July 3, 2019](#)

Such views about Corbyn were, of course, shared on the other side of the Atlantic. In a leaked recording of a conversation with American-Jewish organisations last year, Mike Pompeo, Trump's secretary of state and a former CIA director, spoke of how Corbyn had been made to "run the gauntlet" as a way to ensure he would not be elected prime minister. The military metaphor was telling.

In relation to the danger of Corbyn winning the 2019 election, Pompeo [added](#): "You should know, we won't wait for him to do those things to begin to push back. We will do our level

best. It's too risky and too important and too hard once it's already happened."

This was from the man who said of his time heading the CIA: "We lied, we cheated, we stole. It's - it was like - we had entire training courses."

Smears and Brexit

After a 2017 election that Labour only narrowly lost, the Corbyn threat was decisively neutralised in the follow-up election two years later, after the Labour leader was floored by a mix of antisemitism slurs and a largely jingoistic Brexit campaign to leave Europe.

Claims that this prominent anti-racism campaigner had overseen a surge of antisemitism in Labour were unsupported by evidence, but the smears - amplified in the media - quickly gained a life of their own. The allegations often bled into broader - and more transparently weaponised - suggestions that Corbyn's socialist platform and criticisms of capitalism were also antisemitic. (See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).) But the smears were nevertheless dramatically effective in removing the sheen of idealism that had propelled Corbyn on to the national stage.

By happy coincidence for the power establishment, Brexit also posed a deep political challenge to Corbyn. He was naturally antagonistic to keeping the UK trapped inside a neoliberal European project that, as a semi-detached ally of the US empire, would always eschew socialism. But Corbyn never had control over how the Brexit debate was framed. Helped by the corporate media, Dominic Cummings and Johnson centred that debate on simplistic claims that severing ties with Europe would liberate the UK socially, economically and culturally. But their concealed agenda was very different. An exit from Europe was not intended to liberate Britain but to incorporate it more fully into the US imperial war machine.

Which is one reason that Johnson's cash-strapped Britain is now promising an extra £16.5bn on "defence". The Tory government's priorities are to prove both its special usefulness to the imperial project and its ability to continue using war - as well as the unique circumstances of the pandemic - to channel billions from public coffers into the pockets of the establishment.

A Biden makeover

After four years of Trump, the war machine once again desperately needs a makeover. Wikileaks, its youthful confidence eroded by relentless attacks, is less able to peek behind the curtain and listen in to the power establishment's plans for a new administration under Joe Biden.

Joe Biden

'A cabinet that looks like America': Harris hails Biden's diverse picks

- President-elect pledges global role and emphasises climate fight
- 'Close friend' John Kerry to be America's full-time climate leader
- US politics - live coverage



▲ 'No one I trust more': Joe Biden names John Kerry as first ever US climate envoy - video

We can be sure nonetheless that its priorities are no different from those set out in the CIA memo of 2010. Biden's cabinet, the media has been [excitedly trumpeting](#), is the most "diverse" ever, with women especially prominent in the incoming foreign policy establishment.

There has been a huge investment by Pentagon officials and Congressional war hawks in [pushing](#) for Michèle Flournoy to be appointed as the first female defence secretary. Flournoy, like Biden's pick for secretary of state, Tony Blinken, has played a [central role](#) in prosecuting every US war dating back to the Bill Clinton administration.

The other main contender for the spot is Jeh Johnson, who would become the first black defence secretary. As Biden dithers, his advisers' assessment will focus on who will be best positioned to sell yet more war to a war-weary public.

The role of the imperial project is to use violence as a tool to capture and funnel ever greater wealth – whether it be resources seized in foreign lands or the communal wealth of domestic western populations – into the pockets of the power establishment, and to exercise that power covertly enough, or at a great enough distance, that no meaningful resistance is provoked.

A strong dose of identity politics may buy a little more time. But the war economy is as unsustainable as everything else our societies are currently founded on. Sooner or later the war machine is going to run out of fuel.

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This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

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