

Suburbia and “The American Dream”: Designed by War Planners?

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“It is wrong to believe that postwar American suburbanization prevailed because the public chose it...Suburbanization prevailed because of the decisions of large operators and powerful economic institutions supported by federal government programmes...ordinary consumers had little real choice in the basic pattern that resulted...Essentially city planners saw the atomic threat as a means to accelerate the trend of suburbanization. Plans to circle American cities with open spaces, highways and circumferential life belts was long overdue...

The federal government played a more effective role in reducing urban vulnerability [to atomic attack] in future residential development by working through the Federal Housing Administration [FHA], The Housing and Home Finance Agency and the Federal National Mortgage Association [FNMA]. As the FHA and the FNMA annually guaranteed federal liability for hundreds of thousands of dwelling units, the federal government could mandate that in the future they all be subject to urban defense standards.” The Reduction of Urban Vulnerability: Revisiting 1950s American Suburbanization as Civil Defence, Kathleen A. Tobin



Turns out the “American Dream” of owning a couple of automobiles and a home with cable television in the greener pastures of the suburbs was/is, in good measure, a national security matter. The homes beyond the city center that Americans live in and the highways they cruise are all the result, directly or indirectly, of a national defense program that planners hoped would ensure the existential survivability of America.

Making it tougher for the “Reds”, or these days’ terrorists, to figure out how to vaporize the critical functional elements of America’s national power by dispersing centralized populations/industries to the suburbs was deemed critical to US Cold-War federal, state and local planners, and their counterparts in industry.

The United States government actively promoted the long term urban dispersal of its populations and industries because of the threat of nuclear annihilation by the, then, USSR. Immediately following World War II and throughout the 1950's, publications like the [Bulletin of Atomic Scientists](#) carried the views of prominent officials/academicians who vigorously argued for the dispersal of populations and industries located in major cities throughout the United States. The idea was not to eliminate the urban center but to expand and stretch its radius to such an extent that it would make it more difficult for the "Godless Commies" to pick and choose targets that mattered. In short, city limits would become meaningless.

As a result of the largely successful national defense efforts at urban dispersal in the 1950's, today's opponents (Russia, China, terrorists) planning a nuclear attack on, say, the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia—and defense industrial base office sites that surround it—know that it would be merely a symbolic act as US military command and control functions, and defense manufacturing sites, are not centralized but scattered all over the Washington, DC—Baltimore Metropolitan Region; indeed, all over the country. Deborah Natsios' [National Security SPRAWL: Washington, DC](#) provides one of the premier studies of the after-effect of urban dispersal/suburbanization planning based on national defense requirements.

The threat of nuclear war and the argument for urban dispersal/suburbanization of the American populace had other positive aspects accruing to the US homeland. According to Tobin's work,

"Indirectly the atomic bomb offered a rare opportunity for greatly improving the living conditions of millions of our citizens. Our large cities have been growing larger, resulting in more crowded streets and tenement homes...If [dispersal] is done properly, we will at the same time greatly increase our urban attractiveness."

Who knew that urban renewal and building codes were based, in part, on the need for defense against nuclear weapons?

Dream On: No Free Will, No Free Market

There is a lot of bluster about the free and open market that is supposed to exist in the Western World, in particular in the United States. Senior officials revolving in and out of the federal government and the commercial sector are very fond of promoting the benefits of privatization, deregulation and the invisible hand of the free market which, allegedly, magically sets prices, encourages or discourages competition, and provides consumers free choice in the selection of hard and soft goods.

That is a really big lie.

It is the US federal government, and its national defense dollars, that has stimulated the development of nearly every single technological innovation during and since World War II. It was federal tax breaks/subsidies, federal low interest or secured loans, and federal funding for research and development that prompted an otherwise risk averse, stodgy US private sector to commercialize and produce the products that American war-makers, warfighters and consumers now take for granted.

The lives—individually and collectively—that Americans lead have, in many ways, been planned and designed for them by the realities of war and the necessity to prepare for it.

That life has been sold to them through slick advertising/marketing campaigns equating freedom with consumption and production. Such are the foundations of “American capitalist democracy” along with the necessity to pry open—and exploit- new global markets with a military can opener. These harsh realities must be buried in distracting consumption of things that distract citizens from recognizing reality.

According to [American Capitalism and its Effects](#),

“People in consumerist societies live by the influence of advertisements, and often methodically buy things they do not need, and in most cases, cannot afford. This, in turn, leads to greater economic disparity, and despite having the most or latest products, consumerists have a feeling of unfulfillment due to spending a lot of money, yet having nothing of personal importance.”

It is a tough thought for any American to bear in mind. At least it should be. Less than six degrees of separation removes an American from some product or service that originated from the national defense imperative.

[Unmanned Aerial Vehicles/Drones](#), The Internet, the World Wide Web, Radar and Laser technology, [Synthetic](#) Rubber/Oil/Nylon, Digital Computers, Nuclear Power, Cell Phones, Jet Engines, Rocket/Launch technology and dozens of other innovations were born thanks to the US federal government. In [War Play](#) by Corey Mead (an essential read!) we learn that video games and distance learning were also born of national defense needs, not some geek or guru tinkering in a garage in America’s hinterlands. Mead’s work also shows how much America’s elite universities depend on US federal/military funds: Harvard, MIT and Johns Hopkins among them.

No wonder the US national security community, most recognizably the uniformed military services, are increasingly deified by the American public and viewed with the awe reserved for the Gods. As organized religion has faded in America, the new religion of militarism has ascended.

It makes perfect sense as it was programmed by national defense planners long ago into the sequence that is the American Dream.

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