

The American Art of War

Review of Books

By [Eric Walberg](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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War is the American way of life — Paul Atwood, War and Empire: The American Way of Life; Carl Boggs, The Crimes of Empire: Rogue Superpower and World Domination; Paul Rogers, Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st century; London: Pluto Press, 2010

Three new publications from the leading radical British press are the tip of a growing iceberg of passionate pleas for sanity in international affairs. Most of us prefer to stick our heads in the sand as the world goes to hell in a hand-basket, but there are works that can fascinate and uplift, perhaps even inspire us to do something before it is too late.

If what you need is a reference book for your own writing, with all the gory details of just how disreputable the world's hegemon is, *The Crimes of Empire* by Carl Boggs is what you pull down from your shelf. He has slogged through all the filth of "collateral damage", "humanitarian warfare", "client-state outlawry", "perpetual war", "biowarfare", "space imperialism", Guantanamo — the Orwellian list is seemingly endless — to provide a litany of horrors that will convince even the most sceptical of observers as to who is the real problem in the world.

Not a pretty read, but a commendable labour on the author's part.

More rivetting than Boggs's list of the empire's sins is the justification for them, as revealed by such neocons as Robert Kagan, who sees American force as necessary "to restrain the chaotic tendencies of a Hobbesian world", and who thus rejects any global restraints on US flexibility. "Human rights intervention", the latest buzzword to condone imperial ventures — it once was called the "white man's burden" — is for use by the big guns against the little ones. But Boggs's list of crimes is proof in itself that the imperial project actually creates "a comprehensive lawless whole".

This belies the Dawkinsian claim of evolutionary improvement in society's "moral zeitgeist", which sees an upward trajectory from the slavery of yore to racial, gender and political correctness today, as "proved" by post-WWII multilateral treaties signed at the New York UN HQs or in Geneva. The New World Order is based on "sovereignty of nations", though Boggs points out that some nations are more sovereign than others, undermining the whole farce. The Kagans justify this as "US exceptionalism". But a sober evaluation of today's world reveals that Reagan's "peace through strength" is really nothing but medieval "might makes right".

Anyone with even a smattering of US history can see that the Indian wars and Manifest Destiny of the 18th and 19th centuries were based on the same philosophy of "pre-emptive war" that solemn conferences on security today spout in defence of the indefensible.

This makes for frustrating reading, though it pushes you to make sense of the hypocrisy of world affairs, if nothing else. My own rule of thumb in considering how to resolve social problems is that only when the overwhelming majority wants something and are blessed with a charismatic political leader (take your choice in today's world — they are there) does a real change for the better have a chance. This has nothing in common with a Darwin/Dawkins rational/natural evolutionary process. It is more like a Kuhnian revolutionary paradigm change, a combination of force majeure and luck, once a point-of-no-return is reached.

Corollary: No number of treaties will make for a just and equitable world order if one country overpowers all the others and seeks to impose its will. Another corollary is that the only evolutionary “moral zeitgeist” is the historic-economic order itself — in our case, capitalism — no matter how the dominant “culture” portrays itself for mass consumption. Hurt Locker may be a clever and gripping film by a talented woman director, but it is nonetheless a chauvinistic apologia for a criminal war, with the real victims largely airbrushed out of the picture so as to concentrate on the occupiers' angst. It does nothing to illuminate any possible “moral zeitgeist” apart from the chilling reality of US imperialism itself.

Finally, what the mass of horrors Boggs documents implies is that the only measure of human rights is “How many died?” If that is your rule of thumb, then there can be not one iota of doubt that, despite all the pious words of its leaders, the US is one of the worst offenders that the world has ever witnessed. And that its allies — accomplices — are no less to blame for illegal wars, war crimes, genocides. Thus the so-called pariahs — Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba — for better or worse, are direct products of US imperial actions, lumped together because they oppose the hegemon. Whatever crimes they may commit pale in comparison to the nobler-than-thou US. This is not to defend mistreatment of people anywhere, but to put things in a just light, so that we can navigate the treacherous tunnel we find ourselves globally rushing down.

Here in the Middle East, the US and its “client”, spoiled offspring or whatever you want to call Israel have done nothing to lessen the Hobbesian chaos; on the contrary, they are the source of it. This is the message that Paul Rogers sets out calmly and compellingly in the third edition of *Losing Control*, which has become a popular text for those trying to chart a way through the darkness, and is much more a book to be read and to inspire than Boggs, though it too has lots of useful nitty-gritty for aspiring writers of contemporary politics and economics.

As a veteran peacenik, I found eloquent confirmation for what I and millions of others intuit about the deadend approach of writers who function within the dominant paradigm of international relations.

People's eyes glaze over at the mention of “peace”. It's a bit like heaven: nice but boring. Rogers's argument, however, is compelling and his book readable. In the first edition, before 9/11, he presciently argued that US-NATO military posturing and war-mongering in the face of the growing rich-poor divide, environmental constraints and asymmetrical warfare was self-defeating and would only accelerate the collapse of the comfortable elite Western order.

A widely accepted argument, considered a truism, is that the US “won” the Cold War, that NATO helped the West survive through a “necessary and essentially safe process of

maintaining very large military forces”, an unpleasant but unavoidable balance of terror that ended with the collapse of the “enemy”. Rogers deconstructs this fallacy, arguing that the Cold War was “highly dangerous and inordinately wasteful”, that it created “a momentum in the development of a range of military technologies that has lasted well beyond the end of the Cold War itself”, making present and future conflicts exponentially more devastating for victims and destabilising for the world as a whole.

This professor of peace studies at Bradford University provides telling examples from the North Ireland insurgency, which like the 9/11 attacks but for most of the 20th century penetrated to the very heart of the nation — the nation in this case being Britain. Ireland is still divided, but the insurgency did not fail. Even after the cease-fire collapsed in 1996 with the Canary Wharf bombing, “the British and Irish governments commenced a new drive for peace within hours of the incident. A modern urban-industrial state was certainly vulnerable to political violence, even though most of the explosive devices used were home-made fertiliser bombs.”

Rogers appeals to progressive thinkers in Britain, hoping that the Thatcher legacy of sabre-rattling elitism will eventually give way to an enlightened policy of promoting real security, which means rejecting military force and building a complex, multi-faceted foreign policy of economic assistance to undermine the logic of insurgents and “terrorists”. It really boils down to rich countries voluntarily giving up their (imperial) privileges in the present world order, and effectively redistributing income through proactive trade policies benefitting poor farmers and third world producers, clamping down on huge international corporations, and controlling the excesses the “market” gives rise to.

He has little faith that this will happen soon, but his strategy is a compelling one: for one or more “north” countries to take the initiative to break with the status quo and lead the way, working with the more enlightened “south” political and intellectual leaders. A bono fide truism in human affairs is the parable of the 99 monkeys: that at some point — the “tipping point” — the actions of the few will lead to rapid change, the Kuhnian paradigm shift. Regarding the world’s future, this is what Rogers is staking his bets on.

Once we enter the shift period, the bits and pieces of peace- promotion of the past — UN treaties, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the anti-personnel landmine treaty, the Non-proliferation Treaty, various STARTs — will gain a new lease on life, and lead to a truly multinational drive towards a non- nuclear world and the conversion of arms industries to environmental and other beneficial production, “part of a wider agenda of actions to ensure a persistent programme of cooperative and sustainable development”.

Rogers provides a check-list of the essential steps, and argues compellingly that “There Is No Alternative”. When you are faced with the daily horrors of the current world, in which the raging US bull flails madly at one and all, dipping into *Losing Control* provides some solace. Security can only mean common security, truly global security. It is an elusive vision, but there are concrete steps we can take to work towards it: TINA.

Paul Atwood’s *War and Empire* is a stimulating revisionist romp through American history, though I found the first two chapters too depressing — the deception and betrayal of the innocent natives and their ruthless massacre by greedy settlers is just too close to the

tragedy of the Palestinians for comfort. I got hooked with the post-1776 integration of the “revolutionaries” into the corrupt world of international intrigue, and became fascinated with how US history has been a circus, if a nasty one, ever since, at times aping European revolutionaries and at other times the glamorous aristocracy. The hodge-podge that calls itself American culture today is a mix of all this, and its shallowness is no surprise.

War and Empire is based on the author’s history lectures at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, where he regularly asks students why the US entered any of its many wars and is greeted by quizzical looks and a vacuous “Freedom? National security?”, blissfully unaware of “the centrality of war to the creation and evolution of the US”. The decline in literacy standards depresses Atwood; one of his students earnestly explained to him that “communists employed ‘Asian Orange’ herbicides on American troops” in Vietnam.

The author shows how in the 19th century the drive for suffrage was feared by the Hamiltonian elite as a threat to the goal of creating “an industrial society with centralised banking and control of money”, and made expansion necessary to Democrats and Federalists alike “to provide the growing white population with at least a small stake of property in the new system”. When the shores of the Pacific were reached, this meant building a navy to reach across the Pacific and later the Atlantic, dabbling in Europe’s follies, to feed the hungry capitalist beast and keep the dogs of populism at bay. There is no room in this gruesome march of death for the paper ideals that the “founding fathers” penned. The “permanent war” of today has its genesis in the “permanent war” of yesterday.

Atwood turns up many fascinating tidbits. Arab regimes beware: as early as 1805 the American consul in Tunis asked permission from the (supposedly anti-imperialist) Jefferson to overthrow its ruler and replace him with one more inclined to US interests, thereby out-Hamiltoning his elitist federal rivals.

The presidency is a veritable rogues’ gallery. Andrew Jackson, who killed at least one adversary in his wild youth and was an unapologetic racist to the end, is still unsurpassed as the most bellicose president in US history, having made his name invading the Spanish colony of Florida in pursuit of escaped slaves and pesky natives, doing President Monroe’s dirty work for him. He became Florida’s first governor and went on to win the presidency, benefiting from the extension of the vote to all white males — an appropriate role model for Jeb and George Bush. To the horror of the elite, he scuttled the central bank created by Madison, fighting the bankers’ plans for a centralised industrial state with them in control, and allowed local and state banks to issue money, the last such American-style Don Quixote.

The US has always enjoyed playing European rivals off against each other, using the Napoleonic wars as an opportunity to snatch colonies from both England and France, all the while smuggling goods to both sides. Finally the US Congress declared war against England, the War of 1812, which American history books insist — falsely — that they won. The attempts to annex Canada and Florida failed and the White House was burned to the ground. The most obvious results were the “Star-spangled banner” and the unifying role the war played for the still anarchic settler-state.

No American hero emerges untarnished. Even the saintly Walt Whitman cheer-led probably the most sordid of America’s wars — Polk’s invasion of poor Mexico: “Yes! Mexico must be chastised. America knows how to crush as well as expand!”

The hallowed Civil War was not at all about abolishing slavery, but a direct result of the insatiable hunger for more land, about keeping the increasingly unwieldy and fractious union together, about whether or not the North or South should prevail in extending their economic systems westward. Lincoln's famous emancipation proclamation was issued only in 1863, two years after the start of this suicidal conflagration, and only because the North, despite its overwhelming advantages, was losing and needed to inspire its own blacks to join in the slaughter. They did, and they turned the tide, though there was no "emancipation" for them or their southern brothers, but only the Ku Klux Klan, segregation, lynching, debt servitude, and a legacy of racism still alive and well.

Draping itself hypocritically in anti-slavery rhetoric, Britain watched smugly as its obstreperous ex-colony tore itself apart over which elite would have its way. The weaker America was, the better for the British empire. The tragedy is hard to fathom: the death toll is still unsurpassed in (white) America's history at 600,000 dead vs WWII's 400,000, the South was devastated, the phenomenon of "soldier's heart" (post-traumatic stress disorder) was widespread, with tens of thousands of soldiers homeless and psychologically or physically incapacitated, reduced to begging as there was no social support system.

Atwood's diligent expose of the seamy side of America's past reveals striking parallels between US and Israeli history — the importance of war and expansion, the genocide of the native people justified by racism and a chauvinistic religion, the playing off of European powers against each other, the arrogant nationalism that characterises both states, unconcern for the resentment and hatred that their bellicose behaviour inspires. The Truman Doctrine of 1947 — the updated version of the Monroe Doctrine — acted to extend US dominance over the world, including the Middle East, and was closely followed by the creation of Israel in 1948, with strong backing by the Truman administration. A telling coincidence.

We all know that the pretext for the entry of the US into WWI was the sinking of the Lusitania. But I never knew that this ocean liner was carrying war materiel to England, that the German government warned secretary of state Bryan that it would be sunk, that Bryan's plea to president Wilson to prevent Americans from embarking was overruled. Bryan resigned and the rest is history — the terrible nightmare history of the 20th century. My immediate thought was "Eureka!" This is exactly the way the US people were tricked into entering WWII, with Pearl Harbour the perfect pretext. Atwood hints at but demurs from exploring the willful refusal of the FDR to nip this well-known plan in the bud — no doubt because his "Asian Orange"-spouting students would denounce him as a mentally unbalanced traitor. Nor does he venture into the 9/11 literature hypothesising US (and other) government involvement in our current "Pearl Harbour".

But that is not to detract from his cogent reasoning that the entry of the US into both wars was to prevent the rising German behemoth from dominating Europe and posing a threat to US imperial interests around the world. The consensus in ruling circles was "for a more rationalised world system open to American economic penetration. American entry to [WWI] would be sold as making the world 'safe for democracy'." He understands well that current US wars have a similar logic — to reinforce US hegemony around the world.

For those who bemoan that a once pristine America is now descending into an Orwellian dictatorship with its infringements of the Constitution and illegal wars, it is at least some comfort to recall that such moments in US history abound. The Sedition Act of 1918 made any speech against the government's wartime policies illegal; the "Red Scare" following

WWI led to the creation of the FBI and allowed the deportation of thousands of immigrants because of their political views. US troops assisted British, Czech and Japanese in the invasion of Russia in 1917 to crush the communist revolution, though Russia was already devastated, ensuring that the revolution would be born in blood and war.

The Korean war was so unpopular that by the end 90 per cent of troops hospitalised were from self-inflicted wounds. To soften up the Koreans, the US Air Force carpet bombed the north's dams and dikes — a direct violation of the new Geneva Convention — until two months before an exhausted North Korea finally agreed to an armistice in 1953, pressured by the new post-Stalin Soviet leadership anxious to reduce East-West tensions, fearing a nuclear war. "The West can and does vilify communist crimes. But there is nothing in the communist record not matched by capitalist societies in terms of crimes against humanity."

For those who admire Jimmy Carter as the peacenik president, Atwood reminds us that he extended the Monroe Doctrine with his own corollary: "Any 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 US." But, bless his heart, Carter fails to state the corollary to his corollary: that the only threats to the Persian Gulf were and are the Kissingers and Brzezinskis of US foreign policy. Atwood quotes Nixon and Ford's witty secretary of state during the post-1973 oil embargo: "Pick one of those sheikhdoms, any of them, and overthrow the government there, as a lesson to the Saudis."

Atwood valiantly fights the "Disney version" of his nation's past and his work is to be commended. It's hard to imagine how anyone who acquaints himself with the basic truths of US history can come away uncommitted to fighting its trajectory today. The US was born in war and has thrived by the sword. And its actions are more than adequate confirmation that, "War has never made the world safe for peace but only for more war."

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