

# The Disease of Permanent War

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The embrace by any society of permanent war is a parasite that devours the heart and soul of a nation. Permanent war extinguishes liberal, democratic movements. It turns culture into nationalist cant. It degrades and corrupts education and the media, and wrecks the economy. The liberal, democratic forces, tasked with maintaining an open society, become impotent. The collapse of liberalism, whether in imperial Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Weimar Germany, ushers in an age of moral nihilism. This moral nihilism comes in many colors and hues. It rants and thunders in a variety of slogans, languages and ideologies. It can manifest itself in fascist salutes, communist show trials or Christian crusades. It is, at its core, all the same. It is the crude, terrifying tirade of mediocrities who find their identities and power in the perpetuation of permanent war.

It was a decline into permanent war, not Islam, which killed the liberal, democratic movements in the Arab world, ones that held great promise in the early part of the 20th century in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iran. It is a state of permanent war that is finishing off the liberal traditions in Israel and the United States. The moral and intellectual trolls—the Dick Cheneys, the Avigdor Liebermans, the Mahmoud Ahmadinejads—personify the moral nihilism of perpetual war. They manipulate fear and paranoia. They abolish civil liberties in the name of national security. They crush legitimate dissent. They bilk state treasuries. They stoke racism.

“War,” Randolph Bourne commented acidly, “is the health of the state.”

In “Pentagon Capitalism” Seymour Melman described the defense industry as viral. Defense and military industries in permanent war, he wrote, trash economies. They are able to upend priorities. They redirect government expenditures toward their huge military projects and starve domestic investment in the name of national security. We produce sophisticated fighter jets, while Boeing is unable to finish its new commercial plane on schedule. Our automotive industry goes bankrupt. We sink money into research and development of weapons systems and neglect renewable energy technologies to fight global warming. Universities are flooded with defense-related cash and grants, and struggle to find money for environmental studies. This is the disease of permanent war.

Massive military spending in this country, climbing to nearly \$1 trillion a year and consuming half of all discretionary spending, has a profound social cost. Bridges and levees collapse. Schools decay. Domestic manufacturing declines. Trillions in debts threaten the viability of the currency and the economy. The poor, the mentally ill, the sick and the unemployed are abandoned. Human suffering, including our own, is the price for victory.

Citizens in a state of permanent war are bombarded with the insidious militarized language of power, fear and strength that mask an increasingly brittle reality. The corporations behind

the doctrine of permanent war—who have corrupted Leon Trotsky’s doctrine of permanent revolution—must keep us afraid. Fear stops us from objecting to government spending on a bloated military. Fear means we will not ask unpleasant questions of those in power. Fear means that we will be willing to give up our rights and liberties for security. Fear keeps us penned in like domesticated animals.

Melman, who coined the term permanent war economy to characterize the American economy, wrote that since the end of the Second World War, the federal government has spent more than half its tax dollars on past, current and future military operations. It is the largest single sustaining activity of the government. The military-industrial establishment is a very lucrative business. It is gilded corporate welfare. Defense systems are sold before they are produced. Military industries are permitted to charge the federal government for huge cost overruns. Massive profits are always guaranteed.

Foreign aid is given to countries such as Egypt, which receives some \$3 billion in assistance and is required to buy American weapons with \$1.3 billion of the money. The taxpayers fund the research, development and building of weapons systems and then buy them on behalf of foreign governments. It is a bizarre circular system. It defies the concept of a free-market economy. These weapons systems are soon in need of being updated or replaced. They are hauled, years later, into junkyards where they are left to rust. It is, in economic terms, a dead end. It sustains nothing but the permanent war economy.

Those who profit from permanent war are not restricted by the economic rules of producing goods, selling them for a profit, then using the profit for further investment and production. They operate, rather, outside of competitive markets. They erase the line between the state and the corporation. They leech away the ability of the nation to manufacture useful products and produce sustainable jobs. Melman used the example of the New York City Transit Authority and its allocation in 2003 of \$3 billion to \$4 billion for new subway cars. New York City asked for bids, and no American companies responded. Melman argued that the industrial base in America was no longer centered on items that maintain, improve, or are used to build the nation’s infrastructure. New York City eventually contracted with companies in Japan and Canada to build its subway cars. Melman estimated that such a contract could have generated, directly and indirectly, about 32,000 jobs in the United States. In another instance, of 100 products offered in the 2003 L.L. Bean catalogue, Melman found that 92 were imported and only eight were made in the United States.

The late Sen. J. William Fulbright described the reach of the military-industrial establishment in his 1970 book “The Pentagon Propaganda Machine.” Fulbright explained how the Pentagon influenced and shaped public opinion through multimillion-dollar public relations campaigns, Defense Department films, close ties with Hollywood producers, and use of the commercial media. The majority of the military analysts on television are former military officials, many employed as consultants to defense industries, a fact they rarely disclose to the public. Barry R. McCaffrey, a retired four-star Army general and military analyst for NBC News, was, The New York Times reported, at the same time an employee of Defense Solutions Inc., a consulting firm. He profited, the article noted, from the sale of the weapons systems and expansion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan he championed over the airwaves.

Our permanent war economy has not been challenged by Obama and the Democratic Party. They support its destructive fury because it funds them. They validate its evil assumptions

because to take them on is political suicide. They repeat the narrative of fear because it keeps us dormant. They do this because they have become weaker than the corporate forces that profit from permanent war.

The hollowness of our liberal classes, such as the Democrats, empowers the moral nihilists. A state of permanent war means the inevitable death of liberalism. Dick Cheney may be palpably evil while Obama is merely weak, but to those who seek to keep us in a state of permanent war, it does not matter. They get what they want. Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote “Notes From the Underground” to illustrate what happens to cultures when a liberal class, like ours, becomes sterile, defeated dreamers. The main character in “Notes From the Underground” carries the bankrupt ideas of liberalism to their logical extreme. He becomes the enlightenment ideal. He eschews passion and moral purpose. He is rational. He prizes realism over sanity, even in the face of self-destruction. These acts of accommodation doom the Underground Man, as it doomed imperial Russia and as it will doom us.

“I never even managed to become anything: neither wicked nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect,” the Underground Man wrote. “And now I am living out my life in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and utterly futile consolation that it is even impossible for an intelligent man seriously to become anything, and only fools become something.”

We have been drawn into the world of permanent war by these fools. We allow fools to destroy the continuity of life, to tear apart all systems—economic, social, environmental and political—that sustain us. Dostoevsky was not dismayed by evil. He was dismayed by a society that no longer had the moral fortitude to confront the fools. These fools are leading us over the precipice. What will rise up from the ruins will not be something new, but the face of the monster that has, until then, remained hidden behind the facade.

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