US Military Bases Are Key Pieces of the Global War Machine

Review of The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State by David Vine (University of California Press, 2020).

By Sarah Lazare

Global Research, October 08, 2020

Jacobin 5 October 2020

Region: USA

Theme: Militarization and WMD

We don't hear about them very often, but the estimated 800 US military bases around the globe have played an essential role in turning the whole world into a bloody battlefield. Any effort to roll back US empire has to include dismantling the machinery of US military bases.

***

The estimated eight hundred US bases in more than seventy countries around the world are a massive military presence unlike anything else seen today, yet rarely acknowledged in US political discourse.

The Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa might occasionally grab a headline thanks to sustained and vigorous anti-base protests, and US military bases in Guam might briefly make news due to public opposition to "Valiant Shield" war exercises that have taken place on the US colony during the pandemic. But, overwhelmingly, foreign bases simply are not discussed.

They are immutable, unremarkable facts, rarely considered even during an election cycle that repeatedly invokes concepts like "democracy" and "endless war" and, thanks to a raging pandemic and climate crisis, raises existential questions about what "America" is and should be.

The people living in the countries and US colonies impacted by these bases — the workers who build their plumbing systems, latrines, and labor in the sex trades that often spring up around them, the residents subjected to environmental toxins and war exercises — simply do not exist.

Yet according to David Vine, a political anthropologist at American University, these military bases hold the key to understanding why the United States has consistently been in some state of war or military invasion for nearly every year of its existence as a country.
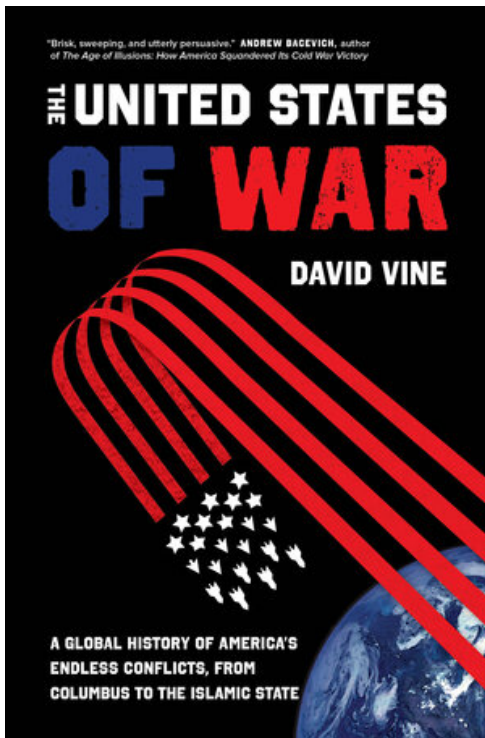
In his new book, [The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State](#), Vine starts with a simple premise: US military bases around the world, from Diego Garcia to Djibouti, are nuts and bolts in the war machine itself. Military bases provide the logistical, supply, and combat support that has allowed the United States to turn the whole world into its battlefield. They make conflict more likely, and then more wars lead to more military bases, in a vicious cycle of expansion and empire.

"Put another way," Vine writes, "bases frequently beget wars, which can beget more bases, which can beget more wars, and so on."

Any effort to understand the US government's near-constant state of war since independence must examine this key infrastructure — not only in its present form, but dating back to the days of Manifest Destiny when "foreign" forts were outposts on Native American land.

While the idea that the global expansion of military bases corresponds with the rise of US empire may seem obvious, this book convincingly shows that it is both consequence and cause. Vine brilliantly documents the way widespread global military positions — which are always sold to the public as defensive — are, by their very nature, *offensive* and become their own, self-fulfilling ecosystems of conquest.

Just as the "[induced demand](#)" principle shows why building more lanes on highways actually increases traffic, *United States of War* makes the argument that military bases themselves incentivize and perpetuate military aggression, coups, and meddling.

From Manifest Destiny to Global Empire

The trajectory toward empire started with white settler expansion within the United States. In 1785, the US Army initiated what "would become a century-long continent-wide fort-construction program," Vine writes. These forts were used to launch violent invasions of Native American lands, to protect white settler towns and cities, and to force Native Americans further and further away from the East Coast.

They were also used to expand the fur trade, which, in turn, encouraged other settlers to keep moving west, with some forts functioning in part as trading posts. The famed expedition of Lewis and Clark was a military mission (Meriwether Lewis was an army captain and William Clark a former infantry company commander) to collect geographic data that would be used for more "fort construction, natural resource exploitation and westward colonization by settlers," Vine notes.

While the United States was expanding its frontier, its Navy was also pursuing fort construction overseas, from North Africa's Barbary Coast to Chile, often for the purpose of securing trade advantages. In the thirty years following the war of 1812 — primarily a war of US expansion — settlers pushed westward within the United States, building infrastructure as they went: roads, trails, and more than sixty major forts west of the Mississippi River by the 1850s. After the United States went to war with Mexico, army bases were constructed in the annexed territory. Forts in Wyoming protected wagon trails, allowing settlers to expand through the western United States.

The violent conquest and massacre of Native Americans did not stop during the Civil War, and it escalated from 1865 to 1898, when "the U.S. Army fought no fewer than 943 distinct engagements against Native peoples, ranging from 'skirmishes' to full-scale battles in twelve separate campaigns," writes Vine. Exterminationist, white supremacist policies were particularly pronounced in California, but took place across the West. After 1876, when President Ulysses S. Grant "turned over" Native Americans to the War Department, Fort Leavenworth was transformed into a prisoner of war camp for the Nimi'ipuu tribe.

Over "almost 115 consecutive years of U.S. wars against indigenous nations," as Vine puts it, US military forts played a consistent role in protecting white settler pillaging and conquest.

In Vine's telling, the War of 1898 was "the start of a new form of overseas empire" which "saw the country expand across the continent with the help of U.S. Army forts and near-continuous war." In some cases, it's possible to draw a direct line between expansion within the United States and conquest abroad.

Nelson A. Miles, US Army commanding general, waged brutal battles against the Kiowa, Comanche, Sioux, Nez Perce, and Apache tribes, then ordered Gen. George Custer's calvary to massacre as many as three hundred Lakota Sioux in 1890, then violently put down the Pullman, Illinois railroad workers strike in 1894.

Miles also led a bloody counterinsurgency war in the Philippines, aimed at defeating its independence movement. (Similar continuity between domestic and global repression can be found today as counterinsurgency tactics and military weapons and equipment are used by US police departments.)

Organized labor, immigrants, recently freed slaves, indigenous peoples at home and abroad: They were all subdued by the same military and police forces making way for white settlement and capital expansion.

After seizing Spanish colonies during the 1898 war, the United States began to pursue a new form of imperialism that was "less dependent on the creation of new formal colonies and more dependent on informal, less overtly violent — but violent nonetheless — political and economic tools backed by military might, including bases abroad," Vine writes. The United

States built up the military presence in the Philippines to seventy thousand troops, using these forces to help put down China's Boxer rebellion, and used its military might to intervene ruthlessly in Panama.

World War II saw the dramatic expansion of military bases, an era inaugurated in 1940, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a deal with Prime Minister Winston Churchill to trade naval destroyers for ninety-nine-year leases in eight British colonies, all located in the Western Hemisphere. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the United States temporarily shrank military personnel spending, and returned roughly half its foreign bases.

Yet the basic global infrastructure of bases (many of which were built with the labor of colonized workers) would remain entrenched — and a "permanent war system," as Vine puts it, was established. During the post–World War II era of decolonization, the United States used its military base network and economic influence, buttressed by new institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to protect its preeminence.

During the Cold War, overseas base expansion became central to the goals of containment and forward positioning, premised on the idea that global bases allow quick response to threats and rapid interventions and deployments in crises. While giving the illusion of increased safety, these bases actually made foreign wars more likely, argues Vine, because they made it easier to wage such wars. In turn, conflict increased construction of US bases.

The Korean War, which killed between three and four million people, prompted a 40 percent increase in the number of US bases abroad, and increasing concern about maintaining bases in the Pacific Ocean. Bases also spread across Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.

CIA stations expanded alongside military bases, and clandestine meddling and supporting coups became a preferred tool of US empire. When the United States waged brutal war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, it was assisted by "hundreds of bases in Japan, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Guam," Vine notes.

The fate of the roughly one thousand Chagossians (descendants of Indian indentured workers and enslaved Africans) from Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean, spotlights the remarkable cruelty of the United States' embrace during this period of "strategic island" approach, whereby the United States established control over small, colonial islands.

After making a secret agreement with Britain in 1966 to purchase basing rights, the US and UK governments expelled its residents between 1967 to 1973, leaving them trapped on Mauritius and Seychelles, without jobs or homes, many of their possessions lost to them forever.

During some phases of the expulsion, residents were forced onto cargo ships, their dogs killed. By 1973, the United States was using this base to support Israel in its 1973 war with Arab nations.

"To this day," Vine notes, "Chagossians and many others among the displaced are struggling to return home, to win some justice and recompense for what they have suffered."

This is where Vine's book is at its best: showing the moral stakes of US empire. Shrouded in the sanitized and sterile think tank–ese of "forward positions," "kinetic action," and "open door policy," the average media consumer would be hard-pressed to know the human costs

of these bases. Vine documents the stakes from the vantage point of the displaced and disenfranchised.

As the author of the definitive English-language [book](#) on Diego Garcia, and a supporter of the return of the organizing efforts of the Chagossians, Vine rightly does not hide his opposition to this profound injustice. He keeps his critiques grounded in recognition of powerful anti-base movements, including the mass protests and strikes that forced the United States to withdraw from all but two bases in Turkey in 1975, and the No-Bases Movement that booted the United States from the Philippines in 1991 (though the United States would later return).

A F-15 deploy to Guam to take part in Exercise Valiant Shield. This is the first time this year that the F-15s have deployed to Guam. (USAF photo by Senior Airman Darnell T. Cannady)

This choice is well conceived. The global movement against US bases — seen in regional cooperation between colonized Pacific islands like Guam (whose indigenous name is Guåhan) and Hawai'i, or the international solidarity developed by the Koreans of Jeju Island — even where it lacks integration and structures for truly coordinated work, is a crucial force in the struggle against US dominance.

War on Terror

The United States used bases from Diego Garcia to Oman to invade Afghanistan in 2001 and, once there, established more bases, and took over former Soviet ones. Likewise, bases from Kuwait to Jordan to Bahrain to Diego Garcia were critical for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, where the United States immediately began building bases and installations post-invasion.

While the Bush-Cheney administration closed some bases in Europe, overall spending on bases "reached record highs" during their time in office, Vine writes. The war with ISIS has seen troops return to Iraq, and the acquisition of bases, even after the Iraqi parliament in 2011 rejected a deal to keep fifty-eight bases in the country.

Since September 11, 2001, the United States has also expanded its presence in Africa, building "lily pads" across the continent — smaller profile, somewhat secretive installations, suggesting "a frog jumping from lily pad to lily pad toward its prey," writes Vine. US bases have been central to waging the 2011 NATO war in Libya, drone strikes in Yemen, military intervention in Somalia and Cameroon.

"The military has been conducting a variety of operations regularly in at least 49 African countries," writes Vine. "It may be operating in every single one."

Meanwhile, base spending has played a key role in the steady uptick of overall military spending. In addition to the direct harm they do through enabling war, bases are associated with incredible fraud and waste, and base contractors renowned for their significant political contributions. This political force, and self-contained logic of sustenance and expansion, is key to understanding how the Military Industrial Complex "can be like Frankenstein's monster, taking on a life of its own thanks to the spending it commands," writes Vine.

The War on Terror ethos, in which the whole world is considered a US battlefield and the

United States grants itself broad latitude to wage preemptive war, has come to define US foreign policy. George W. Bush talked about the importance of having a military "ready to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world," a racist reference, Vine says, to the Middle East, Africa, and Muslim areas of Asia.

Today, the war on ISIS — responsible for significant civilian deaths — continues, as does dangerous brinkmanship with Iran, hedging against China, brutal war in Afghanistan, and US support for the war on Yemen, which has unleashed a profound humanitarian crisis.

Military bases, installations, lily pads, and outposts remain the foundation of this bloody US empire, as they have since the first days of Manifest Destiny.

A Call to Action

Vine's effort to trace the role of US military bases in fomenting wars, and vice versa, is stunningly ambitious. As it should be: the role of US military bases in shaping global history and modern-day cycles of endless war is vast and largely untold. And the only way to explore this relationship is by asking big questions.

Vine should be commended for hurtling himself deftly and intelligently toward a gargantuan task, a thread that runs throughout his work. In his 2015 book *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*, Vine similarly tackled a simple yet huge question: How do US military bases hurt people and societies?

Through this lens, he traced stories of forced displacement, environmental destruction, economic dependency, and loss of sovereignty in countries hosting such bases. By asking questions that should be obvious yet are almost entirely omitted from US discourse, Vine places himself among great anti-militarist writers like the feminist Cynthia Enloe, whose book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* asks how women's "private" lives shape war and foreign policy.

Engaging Vine's book is less like reading a tidy cause-and-effect theory of the relationship between US military bases and wars, and more an exploration of the symbiotic relationship between capital, US empire and racism, and their primary mode of interaction: the military base.

The causal relationship isn't always clear or neat, but this is true of most complex ecosystems. Vine, to his great credit, leans into this messiness. The effect is that one both absorbs a wealth of information and analysis, and leaves with big questions about the supposed moral foundations of Pax Americana.

Vine's discussion of the role of the inertia and corruption of the Military Industrial Complex leaves one hungry to know more about how this self-perpetuating machine operates: What are the mechanisms by which lobbyists, think tanks, soft power operations, and defense contractors collaborate and collude to build public support for, and funnel tremendous funds and resources into, the sprawling US empire? How do State Department forward positions like embassies, and soft power agencies like USAID, factor in on a global scale?

Our current pandemic and related economic crisis has shown that the military, one of the most well-resourced institutions in our society, is not only useless at keeping people safe and well, but is actually making the coronavirus crisis worse by bombing and sanctioning hard-hit countries, and contributed to a bloated, militarized state that siphons public

resources away from public health.

Could the crisis shatter the notion that the US military truly protects "security," and therefore present opportunities for deep change? And how has the rapid upshoot of the movement to defund the police domestically created openings for mass numbers of people to question and reenvision "security" at home and abroad?

Vine's brief discussion at the end of the book of how to correct the profound injustices he has detailed has many great policy solutions but at times feels a bit disconnected from the damning critique in his historical analysis itself. He rightly talks about the need to reduce the political power of the Military Industrial Complex, slash military budgets, and close military bases; and raises the possibility of using antitrust laws to break the power of weapons contractors, as well as introducing legislation prohibiting the Pentagon from lobbying Congress for public funds. He talks about giving people in US colonies full citizenship rights, which would certainly be an improvement on the status quo, but how does this comport with independence movements in places like Puerto Rico?

He argues that "Congress should create a regular review process to assess the need to maintain every base overseas. The Pentagon should be required to scrutinize every base annually as well." But after reading the horrors he lays out in his book, these suggestions seem too incremental and slow.

The most powerful prescription in this book comes through in the historical analysis itself. One walks away convinced that the US empire and its global network of bases must be dismantled if we are to have any hope of putting a stop to the devastating cycle of endless US wars and meddling.

Ultimately, Vine does not tie up every loose end. That's fine — he never promises to. This book should be viewed as the equivalent of a long-distance runner passing a baton, inviting others to take up the inquiry, toward the goal of creating a better world.

"Those concerned and hopefully angered by the U.S. record of war must find ways to demand and force change," Vine writes. Any such change must include the building blocks of US empire: the bases, installations, and lily pads that sprinkle the globe, undermine sovereignty, and make war always seem like the easier, more attractive, more lucrative option.

To oppose this injustice, we must first recognize that it exists and tell its insidious history. Vine's book takes incredible strides toward that end — the rest is up to us.

*

Sarah Lazare is web editor at In These Times. She comes from a background in independent journalism for publications including the Intercept, the Nation, and Tom Dispatch.

Featured image: US naval base in Apra Harbor, Guam. (US Navy / Codie L. Soule / Flickr)

The original source of this article is [Jacobin](#)
Copyright © [Sarah Lazare](#), [Jacobin](#), 2020