

A Very American Coup

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Coming Soon to a Hometown Near You

Here's a bit of cheery news: Last week, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates met with the nation's top defense company executives, including the CEOs of those mega-military-industrial combines Lockheed Martin and Boeing, and called for a "closer partnership." He also made them a promise. He [pledged](#), according to his spokesman, "to work with the White House to secure steady growth in the Pentagon's budgets over time.

Let's put that pledge in context. Last week, President Obama did something common in the Bush years, something he [swore](#) never to do; he requested a supplemental \$33 billion over and above the fiscal year 2011 defense budget, mainly for his Afghan surge. That sum, when appropriated by Congress, will bring the total official Pentagon budget to \$708 billion dollars ([\\$159 billion](#) of which will be directly slated for Afghan and Iraq war costs). To put *that* sum in context, it's close to what the rest of the world combined spends on military matters. And you can be guaranteed of one thing: this won't be the last supplemental request of 2011.

By the way, if you were to add up the *real* "defense" budget, including funds for the Department of Homeland Security, the Energy Department (which handles the U.S. nuclear arsenal), veterans' care, the State Department's planned near-billion-dollar [expansion](#) of its embassy in Pakistan into a mega-command post for the region and the planned [doubling](#) of the number of personnel in its already monstrous embassy in Baghdad for a similar purpose, and many other relevant things, you would be closing in on [\\$1 trillion per year](#).

Meanwhile, in December 2009, the total funds Congress has so far appropriated since 2001 only for our two wars [topped \\$1 trillion dollars](#), with no end in sight, and that figure doesn't include projected future costs ranging from care for soldiers wounded in those wars to the cost of replenishing worn out military equipment. At the war-fighting level, the Congressional Budget Office has already [projected](#) direct war costs over the next decade at \$867 billion.

The Pentagon's 2011 budget is already the highest since World War II, [according to](#) defense analyst Winslow T. Wheeler. Now, consider that the secretary of defense has just "pledged" more of the same for years to come. And note that none of this -- with the possible exception of that \$33 billion supplemental request -- is considered particularly controversial by anyone who matters in Washington, or worth much front-page news attention. Sums that put health-care reform in the shade cause barely a stir. In other words, the Pentagon rules the roost and, as TomDispatch [regular](#) William Astore indicates, it could get a lot worse.

The wars in distant lands were always going to come home, but not this way.

It's September 2016, year 15 of America's "[Long War](#)" against terror. As weary troops return to the homeland, a bitter reality assails them: despite their sacrifices, America is losing.

Iraq is increasingly hostile to remaining occupation forces. Afghanistan is a riddle that remains unsolved: its army and police forces are [untrustworthy](#), its government corrupt, and its tribal leaders unsympathetic to the vagaries of U.S. intervention. Since the Obama surge of 2010, a trillion more dollars have been devoted to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and other countries in the vast [shatter zone](#) that is central Asia, without measurable returns; nothing, that is, except the prolongation of America's Great Recession, now entering its tenth year without a sustained recovery in sight.

Disillusioned veterans are unable to find decent jobs in a crumbling economy. Scarred by the physical and psychological violence of war, fed up with the happy talk of duplicitous politicians who only speak of shared sacrifices, they begin to organize. Their motto: take America back.

Meanwhile, a lame duck presidency, choking on foreign policy failures, finds itself attacked even for its putative successes. Health-care reform is now seen to have combined the inefficiency and inconsistency of government with the naked greed and exploitative talents of corporations. Medical rationing is a fact of life confronting anyone on the high side of 50. Presidential rhetoric that offered hope and change has lost all resonance. Mainstream media outlets are discredited and disintegrating, resulting in new levels of information anarchy.

Protest, whether electronic or in the streets, has become more common -- and the protestors in those streets increasingly carry guns, though as yet armed violence is minimal. A panicked administration responds with overlapping executive orders and legislation that is widely perceived as an attack on basic freedoms.

Tapping the frustration of protesters -- including a renascent and mainstreamed "tea bag" movement -- the former captains and sergeants, the ex-CIA operatives and out-of-work private mercenaries of the War on Terror take action. Conflict and confrontation they seek; laws and orders they increasingly ignore. As riot police are deployed in the streets, they face a grim choice: where to point their guns? Not at veterans, they decide, not at America's erstwhile heroes.

A dwindling middle-class, still waving the flag and determined to keep its sliver-sized portion of the American dream, throws its support to the agitators. Wages shrinking, savings exhausted, bills rising, the sober middle can no longer hold. It vents its fear and rage by calling for a decisive leader and the overthrow of a can't-do Congress.

Savvy members of traditional Washington elites are only too happy to oblige. They too crave order and can-do decisiveness -- on their terms. Where better to find that than in the ranks of America's most respected institution: the military?

A retired senior officer who led America's heroes in central Asia is anointed. His creed: end public disorder, fight the War on Terror to a victorious finish, put America back on top. The United States, he says, is the land of winners, and winners accept no substitute for victory. Nominated on September 11, 2016, Patriot Day, he marches to an overwhelming victory that November, embraced in the streets by an American version of the [post-World War I German Freikorps](#) and the police who refuse to suppress them. A concerned minority is left to wonder (and tremble) at the *de facto* military coup that occurred so quickly, and yet so silently, in their midst.

It Can Happen Here, Unless We Act

Yes, it *can* happen here. In some ways, it's already happening. But the key question is: at this late date, how can it be stopped? Here are some vectors for a change in course, and in mindset as well, if we are to avoid our own stealth coup:

1. Somehow, we need to begin to reverse the ongoing [militarization of this country](#), especially our ever-rising "defense" budgets. The most recent of these, we've just learned, is a [staggering \\$708 billion](#) for fiscal year 2011 -- and that doesn't even include the \$33 billion President Obama has requested for his latest surge in Afghanistan. We also need to get rid of the idea that anyone who suggests even minor cuts in defense spending is either hopelessly naïve or a terrorist sympathizer. It's time as well to call a halt to the privatization of military activity and so halt the rise of security contractors like Xe (formerly Blackwater), thereby weakening the corporate profit motive that supports and underpins the American version of perpetual war. It's time to begin feeling chastened, not proud, that we're by far the [number one country](#) in the world in arms manufacturing and the global arms trade.
2. Let's downsize our global mission rather than [endlessly expanding](#) our military footprint. It's time to have a military capable of defending this country, not fighting endless wars in distant lands while [garrisoning the globe](#).
3. Let's stop paying attention to major TV and cable networks that [rely on](#) retired senior military officers, most of whom have [ties](#) both to the Pentagon and military contractors, for "unbiased" commentary on our wars. If we insist on fighting our perpetual "frontier" wars, let's start insisting as well that they be covered in all their [bitter reality](#): the death, the mayhem, the waste, the prisons, and the [torture](#). Why is our war coverage invariably sanitized to "PG" or even "G," when we can go to the movies anytime and see "R" rated, pornographically violent films? And by the way, it's time to be more critical of the government's and the media's use of language and propaganda. Mindlessly parroting the Patriot Act doesn't make you patriotic.
4. It's time to elect a president who doesn't surround himself with senior "civilian" advisors and ambassadors who are actually retired military generals and admirals, one who won't [accept](#) a Nobel Peace Prize by defending war in theory and escalating it in practice.
5. Let's toughen up. Let's stop deferring to authority figures who promise to "protect" us while abridging our rights. Let's stop bowing down before men and women in uniform, before they start thinking that it's their right to be worshipped and act accordingly.
6. Let's act now to relieve the sort of desperation bred by joblessness and hopelessness that could lead many -- notably male workers suffering from the ["He-Cession"](#) -- to see a militarized solution in "the homeland" as a credible last resort. It's the economy, stupid, but with Main Street's health, not Wall Street's, in our focus.
7. Let's take [Sarah Palin](#) and her followers seriously. They're tapping into anger that's real and spreading. Don't let them become the [voices](#) of the angry working (and increasingly unemployed) classes.
8. Recognize that we face real enemies in our world, the most powerful of which aren't in distant Afghanistan or Yemen but here at home. The essence of our struggle to sustain

our faltering democracy should not be against “terrorists,” with their shoe and crotch bombs, but against various powerful, perfectly legal groups here whose interests lie in a Pentagon that only grows ever stronger.

9. Stop thinking the U.S. is uniquely privileged. Don’t take it on faith that God is on our side. Forget about God blessing America. If you believe in God, get out there and start trying to earn His blessing through deeds.

10. And, most important of all, remember that fear is the mind-killer that makes militarism possible. Ramping up “terror” is an amazingly effective way of shredding our Constitution. Putting our “safety” above all else is asking for trouble. The only way we’ll be completely safe from the big bad terrorists, after all, is when we’re all living in a [maximum security state](#). Think of walking down the street while always being subject to a “full-body scan.”

That’s my top 10 things we need to do. It’s a daunting list and I’m sure you have a few ideas of your own. But have faith. Ultimately, it all boils down to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s words to a nation suffering through the Great Depression: the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. These words came to mind recently as I read the following missive from a friend and World War II veteran who’s seen tough times:

"It’s very hard for me to accept how soft the American people have become. In 1941, with the western world under assault by powerful and deadly forces, and a large armada of ships and planes attacking us directly, I never heard a word of fear as we faced three powerful nations as enemies. Sixteen million of us went into the military with the very real possibility of death and I never once heard of fear, except from those exposed to danger. Now, our people let [their leaders] terrify them into accepting the destruction of our economy, our image in the world, and our democracy... All this over a small group of religious fanatics [mostly] from Saudi Arabia whom we kowtow to so we can drive 8-cylinder SUV’s. Pathetic!

"How many times have I stood in ‘security lines’ at airports and when I complained of the indignity of taking off shoes and not having water and the manhandling of passengers, have well educated people smugly said to me, ‘Well, they’re just keeping us safe.’ I look at the airport bullshit as a training ground to turn Americans into docile sheep in a totalitarian state."

A public conditioned to act like sheep, to “support our troops” no matter what, to cower before the idea of terrorism, is a public ready to be herded. A military that’s being used to fight unwinnable wars is a military prone to return home disaffected and with scores to settle.

Angry and desperate veterans and mercenaries already conditioned to violence, merging with “tea baggers” and other alienated groups, could one day form our own *Freikorps* units, rioting for violent solutions to national decline. Recall that the Nazi movement ultimately succeeded in the early 1930s because so many middle-class Germans were scared as they saw their wealth, standard of living, and status all threatened by the Great Depression.

If our Great Recession continues, if decent jobs remain scarce, if the mainstream media continue to foster fear and hatred, if returning troops are disaffected and their leaders blame politicians for “not being tough enough,” if one or two more terrorist attacks

succeed on U.S. soil, wouldn't this country be well primed for a coup by any other name?

Don't expect a "[Seven Days in May](#)" scenario. No American Caesar will return to Washington with his legions to decapitate governmental authority. Why not? Because he won't have to.

As long as we continue to live in perpetual fear in an increasingly militarized state, we establish the preconditions under which Americans will be nailed to, and crucified on, a [cross of iron](#).

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