

The United States of War

The Editors of Monthly Review

Much of the impact of Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy's now-classic work *Monopoly Capital* when it was published in 1966, at the very height of the Vietnam War, can be attributed to its chapter on "Absorption of the Surplus: Militarism and Imperialism." The chapter began with the question: "Why does the United States oligarchy need and maintain such a huge military machine nowadays when it used to get along with such a little one?" By 1959, they pointed out, the United States had acquired a total of 275 major military base complexes in 31 countries, while it had more than 1,400 military bases altogether, including all sites that the United States then occupied, plus base areas it had set aside around the world for emergency occupation. Approximately a million troops were stationed in these bases. (Later, other estimates utilising different methodologies put the number of U.S. military bases in 1957 at 883, and at 1,014 in 1967.) Although the United States had few colonial possessions outside of Puerto Rico and some Pacific islands, its foreign military bases plus its direct political-economic dominance over individual countries around the world constituted, in Baran and Sweezy's argument, an "American empire." Since 1945, the United States had already fought one major regional war in Asia—in Korea—and was then engaged in another in Vietnam. According to Harry Magdoff a few years later, U.S. military spending in 1968 on a per capita basis, adjusted for price changes, dwarfed that of all the great powers combined in the buildup to the Second World War and was more than twice that of Nazi Germany (Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966], 178–217 [all otherwise unspecified page citations that follow are to this work]; Harry Magdoff, *Imperialism: From the Colonial Age to the Present* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978], 205; John Bellamy Foster, *Naked Imperialism* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006], 57).



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How, then, could the massive U.S. military expansion in the post-Second World War years be explained? The usual propagandistic answer at the time—that the purpose of the U.S. war machine was primarily to counter military aggression by the Soviet Union—could be dismissed out of hand. Even hardened Cold Warriors, such as George Kennan, author of the “containment” strategy, together with such influential U.S. figures as diplomat Chester Bowles, Senator J. William Fulbright, and neoliberal journalist Walter Lippmann, all held to the general consensus among those in power that the Soviet Union was not an aggressive military power like Nazi Germany. Even William Schlamm, the former editor of *Fortune* magazine, who proposed threatening the USSR with nuclear Armageddon in order to force it to dissolve the Warsaw Pact, stated: “Communism thrives on peace, wants peace, triumphs in peace” (186).

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Hence, “the American oligarchy’s need for a huge military machine must be sought elsewhere than in a non-existent threat of Soviet aggression.” The beginning of an answer was to be found in the 1947 Truman Doctrine, in which Washington proclaimed that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure” everywhere in the world. So sweeping was this pronouncement that it meant that the United States had established itself as the world gendarme opposing not only the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence, but all revolutions, and, in effect, all substantive change in every corner of the globe (186–88).

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The gargantuan U.S. military budget, Baran and Sweezy argued, was therefore not simply a response to the rise of an alternative socialist bloc, but grew out of the history of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Capitalism since its inception has been an international system characterised by a hierarchy of nation-states, divided into center and periphery with those at the very top of the hierarchy having larger military capabilities. This went hand-in-hand with colonial-imperial expansion and the wars between competing capitalist empires. The United States itself had been conceived from the start by its so-called founding fathers in imperialist terms, as demonstrated by historian Richard W. Van Alstyne in *The Rising American Empire* (New York: Norton, 1960). In addition to the wars against Indigenous populations and the seizure of large parts of Mexico in the Mexican-American War, Washington at the brink of the twentieth century forcibly annexed Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific in the Spanish-American War, leading to a two-decades-long war in the Philippines to suppress the population there. As early as the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, it had asserted its hegemony over the entire Western Hemisphere, following this up with incessant military interventions. Thus, “having already achieved the status of a ‘have’ power [in imperial terms] by the time the Germans and Japanese were ready to launch their leadership bids, the United States was constrained to make common cause with the other ‘have’ powers [namely Britain and France] in the First and Second World Wars.” In this respect, militarism and imperialism characterised the entire history of U.S. capitalism (178–83).

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U.S. efforts to exercise its hegemonic control over the third world after the Second World War were part of the same imperial expansionism. This took the form of providing military backing for the expansion abroad of U.S. multinational corporations, including the overthrow of any nationalist and socialist forces that set limits on the power of the multinationals. In addition to serving the needs of empire, military spending placed a floor under effective demand, often pump-priming the economy, while directly supporting big business through the guaranteed high profits provided

by what U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower labelled the “military-industrial complex.” As U.S. News and World Report gleefully put it in 1954, “the H-bomb has blown depression-thinking out the window” (191–202, 207–13).

Hence, the whole basis of the argument on militarism and imperialism in Monopoly Capital was that the sheer

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magnitude of U.S. wars and war preparation was not primarily a product of the Cold War, but derived from the fundamental imperatives of U.S. capitalism/imperialism of which the Cold War itself was a mere manifestation. A logical corollary of this view was that if the Soviet Union were to leave the world stage

(a possibility inconceivable at the time), the United States would nonetheless continue its militarism, since it derived from its more fundamental imperialist impulse.

This, in fact, is what actually happened beginning only months after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. In what is

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known as the Wolfowitz Doctrine (after the U.S. undersecretary of defence Paul Wolfowitz), Washington declared that, in the geopolitical vacuum left open by the USSR's disappearance from the world stage, the United States would employ its military power to implement regime change in strategic countries not under its control, particularly in areas formerly within the Soviet sphere or in the oil-rich Middle East and North Africa, creating a new unipolar world order while preventing the emergence of another great power that could challenge

U.S. global hegemony. As former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski put it, the United States, in its eastward expansion of NATO as far as Ukraine—regarded as the “geopolitical pivot” in confronting Russia—had as its object the consolidation of its position as “the first and the only truly global power” (“Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: Preventing the Re-emergence of a New Rival,” New York Times, March 8, 1992; General Wesley K. Clark, Don't Wait for the Next War [New York: Public Affairs, 2014], 37–40; Zbigniew Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard [New York: Basic Books, 1997], 10, 46).

A new era of naked imperialism was thus unleashed beginning in 1991. According to the Congressional Research

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Service, the United States has launched a total of 251 military interventions in foreign countries since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, as compared to 469 over its entire history. In the words of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, the United States is “the most warlike nation in the history of the world.” All of this has

led in recent years to the development of more all-encompassing analyses of the history of U.S. militarism and imperialism (Congressional Research Service, Instances of Use of U.S. Armed Services Abroad, March 8, 2022; Ben Norton, “U.S. Launched 251 Military Interventions Since 1991, and 469 Since 1798,” Geopolitical Economy, September 13, 2022; Brett Wilkins, “Jimmy Carter: US ‘Most Warlike Nation in the History of the World,’” Common Dreams, April 18, 2019).

One such reassessment is provided by MR author David Vine in his 2020 book *The United States of War*. Vine adopts a methodology of focusing on the history of U.S. military bases as a means of mapping the development of U.S. military

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power, beginning with the wars against Indigenous nations and peoples in the early years of the republic and extending all the way to what he calls the “hyper imperialism” of the years from 1991 to the present. An important part of his analysis of the U.S. base empire is his discussion of the secretive “lily-pad bases” that

Washington has established around the world, which make the actual numbers of U.S. military bases today difficult to calculate. Nevertheless, the United States currently has at least eight hundred military bases located in eighty-five countries/territories outside the fifty states and Washington, D.C. Four hundred of these bases currently surround China (David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America’s Endless Conflicts from Columbus to the Islamic State* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020], 2, 279–97).

An extensive commentary on the U.S. way of death is provided by David Michael Smith in his 2023 book [Endless Holocausts](#). Smith’s book consists of the detailed documentation, based primarily on establishment sources, of mass deaths due to war together with other forms of social murder, attributable to the “U.S. Empire” over its history. Thus, he details how:

Between 1945 and 1980, major U.S. wars in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia killed twelve million people. Washington also shared responsibility for the 1.7 million people who died during the rule of the Khmer Rouge, and the U.S. proxy war in Afghanistan led to the deaths of at least 1.5 million. U.S. support for the Guomindang in the second phase of the Chinese civil war, for the French campaign to reconquer Vietnam, for the anti-communist exterminations in Indonesia, for the Biafran war, and for the Pakistani government during the Bangladesh War implicated Washington in the deaths of almost 11 million people.

Altogether, including other millions of deaths, the United States was directly responsible or shared responsibility for the deaths in that same period of some twenty-nine million people. Similarly,

Between 1980 and 2020, two U.S. wars and sanctions in Iraq and the U.S. war in Afghanistan killed more than two million people. Washington’s proxy wars in Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria resulted in roughly nine million deaths. U.S. military interventions, support for client states and rebels, and related famines in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria cost the lives of another five million people. The U.S. Empire’s role in the collapse of most socialist regimes [including the imposition of economic shock therapy] made it partly responsible for well over seven million deaths.

Still more millions died due to other U.S. hostile actions abroad in the period, with Washington in these years having direct or shared responsibility for the deaths altogether of more than twenty-five million people (David Smith, *Endless Holocausts: Mass Death in the History of the United States Empire* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023], 208–9, 256–57).

“Imperialism,” Magdoff wrote in 1969, “necessarily involves militarism. Indeed, they are twins that have fed on each other in the past, as they do now.” To combat the spread of militarism and war throughout the globe today, it is necessary to confront the imperialist world system centred in Washington (Magdoff, *Imperialism*, 205).

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