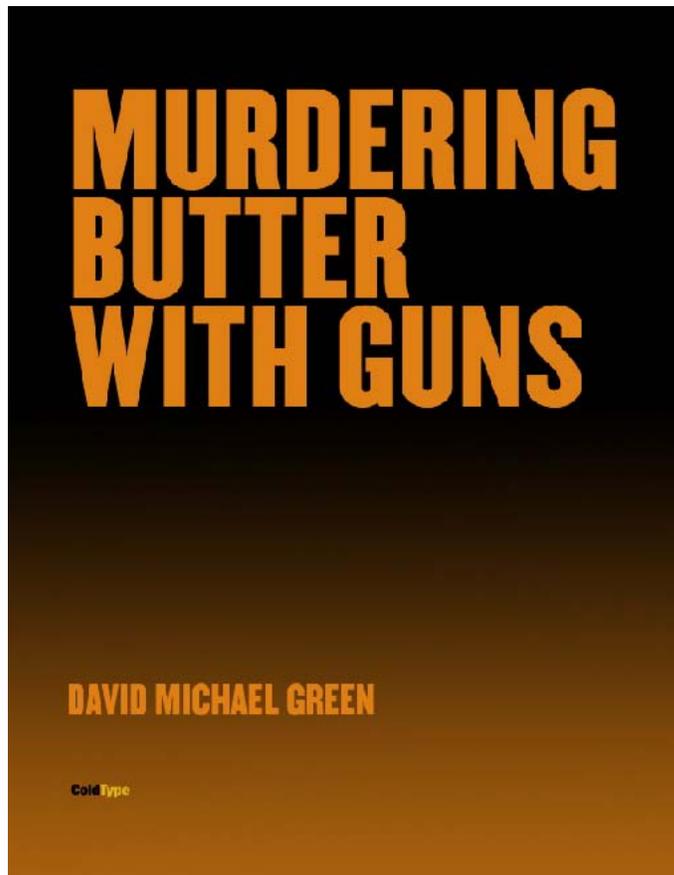


**MURDERING
BUTTER
WITH GUNS**

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ColdType



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A FUNNY thing happened on the way to the White House in 1981. Ronald Reagan had been talking throughout the previous year's campaign about taking a meat-axe to federal taxes (and therefore, also, revenue, but that part somehow never got mentioned), about massively increasing military spending, and about balancing the budget. And doing all at once, no less.

Even a Republican could figure out – if they allowed themselves to – that the numbers couldn't possibly add up. Indeed, no less a Goppy than Poppy (one George Herbert Walker Bush) referred to this preposterous suite of promises as “voodoo economics”. Er, he did that is, during the primaries, when he was competing with Reagan for the nomination. Once he had lost and was hungering for the newly nice and oh-so wise Saint Ron to offer him the vice-presidency, he all of a sudden became strangely silent on the topic, reminding the rest of us once again what is mankind's second-oldest profession – a gig very much not unlike the first.

The mystery of how Reagan could possibly do all of these things was finally solved when the administration proposed its first budget and he absolutely didn't. It couldn't, of course, and not only did Reagan fail to balance the federal budget as promised, he actually went on to quadruple the national debt, choosing instead to avidly pursue the two more important remaining goals of his troika, tax-slashing and military spending.

Many people wondered at the time how the Republican Party could sustain this debt-crazed apostasy (not to mention hypocrisy), particularly after so many years of hammering the Democrats as “tax-and-spend liberals”. (Oh, and by-the-way Item Number One: The numbers involved would pale against those of today's borrow-spend-and-giveaway Republicans.) (Oh, and by-the-way Item Number Two: Nevertheless, in an attempt to demonstrate that there truly is absolutely no bottom whatsoever to the well of GOP hypocrisy, tnow we have Righteous George, Protector of the Purse, vetoing S-CHIP legislation and replaying the party's tired old and now jaw-droppingly absurd tune as he claims that the Democratic Congress is being profligate with the public's tax dollars. No-bid billions for the Blackwater black-hole? Absolutely. Money for sick kids? Irresponsible!)

When Reagan first went down this path, it was so weird that a conspiracy theory

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of sorts arose. The notion was that Republicans knew they could not possibly go through the front door to successfully kill popular programs like Social Security and Medicare, even if they were willing to risk political suicide to do so. So Reagan's agenda was a back-door approach, instead.

Driving up the debt to completely unsustainable levels, the story went, America would be faced with a series of uncomfortable choices as collectors came demanding their payments. The country could either raise taxes, cut military spending, or slash social programs. The idea was that, of the three, the last of these would seem to the public like the least worst choice. And then conservatives could surreptitiously achieve a long-held goal, best expressed by Grover Norquist, right-wing tax crusader extraordinaire: "I don't want to abolish government, I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub." By "government", of course, he means the parts that help people, not the parts that kill people. For the right, those parts are okay. If not beloved.

Perhaps this conspiracy was real all along. Boy Bush has made Reagan look like Leona Helmsley's accounts-payable supervisor by comparison when it came to deficit spending, managing to borrow more than all other American presidents (that's 42 of them, if you're keeping score here), combined. Ouch. That's a lot of cash, dude. Indeed, about nine trillion bucks or so now on the national credit card, and rapidly rising. Plus, of course, interest. Trust me, you don't want to be handed the bill for this party of the millennium, and neither do your children ("Excuse me, you did *what* to us?").

But even if the alleged conspiracy was actually real, it seems likely to have been a bad bet all along. That is, I don't think it's a given that, presented with these three options, Americans would necessarily acquiesce to the destruction of the country's social safety net, especially the massive cohort of Baby Boomers who are just now approaching the age where their hands are going to be extended outward, palm up. I think that given such a stark choice, something miraculous might occur. Americans might choose to finally give up their empire instead, just as the British did when they could no longer afford to pay for both guns and butter after the two world wars. This conservative plan, if it was ever real, could backfire quite nicely into forcing the country to think seriously about excessive military spending for the first time since World War II, and then perhaps to, in the words of Colin Powell, "cut it off, and then ... kill it".

To see what I mean, let's pull Joe Six-Pack – or preferably, the Baby Boomer version of Joe Six-Pack (Joe Dime-Bag?) – off the street and ask him some basic questions about his priorities for American government:

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Joe, which would you prefer, to receive your Social Security payments, or to bring democracy to the Middle East (even assuming it could be done by American military force, which it quite clearly cannot)?

Which would you prefer, Joe, to fully fund Medicare, or to protect the ability of American corporations to pillage third world countries unhampered by inconveniences like, say, the governments of those countries?

Which would you prefer, education for your children and grandchildren, or continued tax breaks for Americans who are already fabulously wealthy?

Which would you prefer, national infrastructure that isn't crumbling, or corporate welfare programs for well-connected defense industry firms?

These may seem like tongue-in-cheek pokes at America's national priorities, but they will actually become very real choices in the near future, especially if there is a progressive party or other force in America able to articulate the obvious options, and provided the the word can get out. Given the performance of the Democratic Party and the media of late, these are far from foregone conclusions. (Heck, I'm far from even being convinced that Bush and Cheney will actually leave office on January 20, 2009. Watch for them to pull a Putin.) But apart from those major caveats, these questions will rapidly become all too real.

When the bill for the fiscal blow-out comes due, hard choices are going to have to be made. Americans are not big on taxes, but they don't support the idea of the rich getting a free ride. That hard choice is likely to be an easy choice.

Americans will never accept a weak defense apparatus that leaves the country vulnerable to attack. But beyond that, they may well finally be open to some thoughtful discussion about what is needed to achieve that end – and where the rest of the money is going – especially if such a dialogue is prompted by the requirements imposed by an encroaching reality, forcing decisions like the ones posited above.

Right now, it's a safe guess that the public has only the vaguest notion of the costs and capacities of the American military, especially in any relative sense. Most people probably understand that the United States has the most powerful military in the world, and they support that. On the other hand, they might well be horrified to learn just how expensive that military is, how ridiculously disproportionate it is to the others in the world, and how removed those costs are from any real threat facing the country. In times of plenty – or faux plenty – when your government is giving you tax money back even while it is fighting two wars simultaneously, those questions don't need to be asked (or at least one can be so deluded into thinking).

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But those days will soon be gone, and – as they say – payback’s a bitch.

It’s harder than might be imagined to track federal expenditures, because there are lots of accounting choices (and nifty tricks, if you so desire to trick people) involved. But, near as I can tell, the US is now contemplating a budget of \$672 billion this year for ‘defense’. That, by the way, is up from \$385 billion in 2000, measured in constant (2007) dollars. And that, of course, is nearly a doubling, from what was already a huge amount. These numbers don’t include the costs of past wars (principally debt from loans), estimated in 2006 to be about \$264 billion. If you add that figure to the \$572 billion spent last year for last year’s military, you get \$837 billion spent on the military in 2006, or 41 percent of the federal budget.

How does that stack up comparatively? Social Security took \$595 billion in 2006. Twelve percent of the budget went to poverty initiatives, five percent to community and economic development, and two percent to science, energy and environmental programs.

How does that stack up internationally? In 2004, while the rest of the world’s military expenditures equaled \$500 billion, the US was spending \$534 billion. That is to say, more than all the rest of the entire world. Combined.

Americans might even be fine with a military budget that dwarfs the sum total for entire rest of the world – nearly 200 other countries – assuming unlimited resources to provide butter as well as guns (though if they knew the relative figure was quite that big, they might choke a bit on the expenditures even with low taxes and adequate social spending). But when you reach the point where you start having to choose one or the other – a point we actually reached long ago, but have hidden from ourselves by borrowing – everything is different, hence the above alternatives for Joe Six-Pack to ponder.

What is sorely missing today, and would be even more so at the moment when our fiscal recklessness is no longer sustainable even under conditions of mass societal hallucination, is simply a rational discussion of the purposes of the United States military. Once that happens, programmatic and budgetary choices then follow in the logical order which they should in any universe where people are even remotely in touch with reality.

In fact, the current military budget could easily be slashed, because the only reason for its ridiculously bloated proportions is to pursue missions far beyond those Americans would support even during conditions of plenty, let alone when the alternative becomes giving up their expected benefits.

If we think about military priorities from the ground up, without any built-in assumptions, and without the necessity of maintaining existing programs on the

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basis of inertia alone, I don't think we'd get very far before the public would shout out "enough", especially if they were faced with the choice of having their Social Security checks bounce in order to instead fund some obscure military objective on behalf of corporate interests in Burkina Faso.

What do Americans want? They want defense, in the true meaning of the word. To begin with, I have little doubt that Americans would be willing to spend whatever it takes to defend American soil from foreign attack. When it comes to state-based violence, that need could be fairly easily addressed by a nuclear deterrent force a tenth of the size of the current one, along with a moderate contingent of land and naval forces. The cost of these represent a small fraction of the current total military budget. No country is ever going to attack the United States in either a traditional operation using conventional forces or by means of non-conventional weapons, of course, because to do so would mean their instant obliteration. Whatever else one can say about nuclear weapons and all the real and potential horrors of mass annihilation, they do give pause to those who would contemplate an attack, in all but the most dire conflicts or screw-ups. (And this works both ways, of course. It is no accident that the US never attacked the Soviet Union or China, for instance, or that Bush did go into Iraq, but not North Korea.) Perhaps some day nuclear weapons can be eliminated from the planet. In the meantime, though, a small quantity of them could form part of a defense structure that permitted the US to dramatically cut military spending while allowing Americans to feel secure from external threat.

Americans would also support, I think, the military having the capability to respond to certain emergencies abroad – say, enough force for the early stages of a scenario where an ally was invaded, or US diplomats or nationals needed to be rescued from some sort of foreign incident. This means some special forces – again, a relatively small and inexpensive portion of the current military budget – and the same small to moderate land and naval forces charged with defending the national borders.

Clearly, the public would also support whatever force is necessary to effectively attack and destroy non-state actors, such as al Qaeda, who seek to harm the United States through non-conventional assaults. John Kerry of course paid the price for speaking honestly about this in 2004, back when this country was still shaking off the hangover from the Bush Binge of 9/11 and beyond, but he was right in asserting that terrorist threats are best resisted by means of intelligence and law enforcement (and sometimes small scale military action, when useful), which is also a relatively low-cost affair, comparatively speaking. (Throw in a little global justice and economic development, moreover, and you might find you've eliminated most such threats before they ever come to exist. What a concept, eh?)

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Finally, unquestionably, there would be support in the United States for the capacity to rapidly increase US military capability in response to a major unexpected scenario. Americans will want a National Guard, Reserves, and the infrastructure necessary for a Post-Pearl Harbor-like draft and rapid militarization in the event of such an unanticipated attack. But again, maintaining this capacity – as opposed to the actual forces – is not a terribly expensive proposition.

And that, I suspect, is it. A moderate base force, a small nuclear deterrent capability, the Guard and Reserves, and the capacity to rapidly add more as needed. In sum, a vastly smaller military than today's.

This is not World War II we're in today, and it's not the Cold War. There is no need for a massive military armada to be fielded or even to stand in readiness, as there is no massive implacable enemy to be vigilant against, let alone a massive implacable enemy which we would fight with conventional set-piece armies to be landed at places like Normandy, and to fight territorial struggles like the Battle of the Bulge.

What is the difference, then, between this American military that the public would support and the one we've got, besides of course hundreds of billions of dollars per year? The short answer is the capacity to 'protect' American 'interests' abroad. Does the American public care whether Botswana is a democracy or not? Probably a little – not that anyone would have the slightest clue where or what it is – but not enough to invest their tax dollars in it, not enough to forego the government services they want at home, and not enough to spill their children's blood there. Turns out their government doesn't care either, though it may well pretend to on occasion. It doesn't even care whether Botswana – democracy or autocracy – is particularly 'pro-American'.

What the American government cares about, above all, is that Botswana plays ball with those economic actors (who nowadays might not even necessarily be American-based) with a pipeline to power in Washington. Usually that means that a neat little dictatorship is in fact preferable to a democratically elected government, particularly one that makes the mistake of having the real interests of the local people in mind. Folks in Iran, Chile, Guatemala, Nicaragua and beyond will be happy to verify this proposition, in case you have any doubt.

Which brings us back to the absurd levels of military spending the United States has been indulging in latter years, like an insatiable crack addict. I hate to break up the acid test party with a mild dose of reality, but it's pure lunacy to spend considerably more than all of nearly 200 other countries in the world on your national defense. I mean, isn't it? Is there really no limit to the depths of America's national paranoia? Well, as a matter of fact, it gets far stranger yet when you contemplate that none of those countries – not even North Korea, Cuba or Iran – have expressed any-

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thing approaching a genuine hostility toward your country which could plausibly lead to an attack on their part. Then it becomes the very definition of insane when you have a nuclear deterrent force that prevents any of those countries from attacking you even if they wanted to. And it makes the insane look downright wholesome when you spend these obscene sums to fight a non-existent enemy, but cannot afford a children's healthcare program at home. If you needed to write a definition of a society gone mad, surely this would be the textbook case.

Let's face it, probably three-fourths of the Pentagon budget is spent to enrich contractors at home and bust down doors for corporate predators abroad. China spends about \$60 or \$70 billion a year on protecting the same geographical area as the US and more than four times the number of people. Who is going to mess with that country? Not even the United States, with ten times the military budget, would dare. Surely America could easily procure the same degree of security as the Chinese do for – let's be generous – say, double their expenditure, if its true interests were purely defensive.

Nor would such a formula be a prescription for disarmament or a wimpy defense posture. This is still double the amount of any other country in the world. Certainly many would argue that far less than even that much should be spent. I'm one of them, but right now I'd gladly settle for a 75 percent reduction in military spending.

Of course, there are those who would claim that the United States is the 'indispensable nation', the one that provides the glue for keeping peace in the international system, and the only one capable of mounting an operation like the Iraq war. Let's leave aside for the moment the poor performance of keeping peace during the 'American century', which often seemed rather more like the American adventure series, and let's leave aside also the disasters of Afghanistan, Vietnam and Iraq. What a critique such as this actually reveals is three things. First, that other developed countries have been able to buy butter like national healthcare and such, while we have stupidly forsaken it for guns. Second, that the result of our spending the last decades undermining the creation of a legitimate and functional international force to clean up international messes is – surprise, surprise – that no such forces now exist to carry this burden. And third, that we're too arrogant and narcissistic to pay attention to the wake-up call that non-interest in our wars among potential allies represents.

This is where multilateralism comes into play in a crucial and cognitive fashion. If we can't attract serious allied support for a war, it's certainly worth asking whether we should be engaged in such a conflict at all. Neocon blowhards love to argue that Europeans have gone soft and are all from Venus, while tough-guy Americans are

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from Mars. The truth is that Europeans were fighting wars long before America was even in diapers, and they've learned more from the experience than have we. They're not soft. Rather, it's that they're not indiscriminate. They went to Afghanistan. They didn't go to Iraq. Or at least a lot of them didn't. The others only went because they wanted to keep the hyperpower happy. The next stop was regret, followed by withdrawal of what were mostly token forces anyhow. In any case, for a legitimate threat or a legitimate emergency (the antithesis of Iraq), the Europeans and many others would stand shoulder to shoulder with America, as has happened many times previously, including those wimpy cheese-eating French who were there at America's birth, and without whom, indeed, the country would likely not have been born at all.

But wouldn't cutting American military spending dramatically make the country weaker? To the contrary, our current approach makes us weaker. We have lost the capacity to exert soft power by over-reliance on hard power. Nobody follows us anymore unless they have to because we have twisted their arm nearly out of its socket, or unless they're into committing career suicide, like Tony Blair did. And, increasingly, that simply means that nobody follows us anymore at all. The tauntings of Hugo Chávez or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would have been inconceivable not so long ago. Now they represent leadership to a resentful world where the arrogant and impotent superpower has hobbled itself, and can do nothing to respond. Meanwhile, China and Russia quietly build power and influence, wondering what they ever did to get so lucky as to have a rival apparently quite devoted to destroying itself.

In addition to being so diplomatically, we are also weakened economically. Dollars spent on bombs instead of education mean a dummer 'Muricah, bro. Dollars spent on napalm instead of education mean a sicker America. And ask the Soviets what happens to a national economy when it is dominated by military spending. If you can find the Soviets, that is, which you can't (hint, hint). National security in the modern era depends on economic power as well as on legions and hardware. In a very real sense, therefore, we are diminishing our capacity to provide sustained military security should we need it tomorrow, by bloating it out of all recognition today.

Finally, it is pretty impossible to argue that recent choices have made the America militarily stronger in even the most narrow sense. When all your land forces are bogged down in a worse than useless war, you've got a problem should a real crisis come 'round the corner. When even a sycophant like Colin Powell can say that your Army is "broken", surely it is and worse. When your own intelligence agencies affirm that your actions in Mesopotamia are actually creating terrorists with a vengeance (and with a vengeance), you screwed up bad, pal. When nobody believes you any-

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more including your own public, and you have to pay exorbitant sums to get people otherwise headed to jail to join your 'volunteer' military, it's no longer clear which is scarier – your army or theirs. Hey everybody, raise your hand right now if you feel safer today than before Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld got hold of US national security policy. Yeah, that's what I thought.

All this obscenely exorbitant military spending represents one helluva lot of bad news, but the good news is that the entire scenario is unsustainable. One day, not long from now, Americans will have to make tough choices that they are avoiding (and therefore exacerbating) today. But in all probability, such choices may not actually wind up being so tough, after all.

We want our MTV, and we want our Social Security.

And if we have to sacrifice protecting Chiquita Brands' exorbitant profits in Guatemala or Colombia to get them, we will.



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