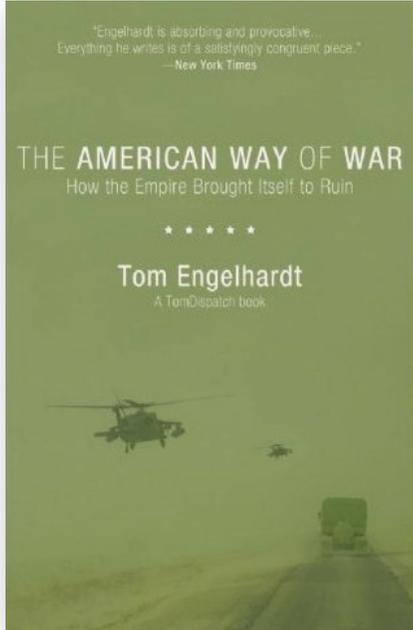


# THE WAR MENTALITY



**FIVE ABSURD THINGS  
THAT SIMPLY CAN'T HAPPEN  
IN WARTIME WASHINGTON**

**TOM ENGELHARDT**



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**T**he other day I visited a website I check regularly for all things military, Noah Shachtman's Danger Room blog at Wired magazine. One of its correspondents, Spencer Ackerman, was just then at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, the sort of place that – with its multiple bus routes, more than 30,000 inhabitants, PXes, Internet cafés, fast-food restaurants, barracks, and all the sinews of war – we like to call military bases, but that are unique in the history of this planet.

Here's how Ackerman began his report: "Anyone who thinks the United States is really going to withdraw from Afghanistan in July 2011 needs to come to this giant air base an hour away from Kabul. There's construction everywhere. It's exactly what you wouldn't expect from a transient presence." The old Russian base, long a hub for U.S. military (and imprisonment) activities in that country is now, as he describes it, a giant construction site and its main drag, Disney Drive, a massive traffic pile-up. ("If the Navy could figure out a way to bring

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a littoral-combat ship to a landlocked country, it would idle on Disney.") Its flight line is packed with planes – "C-17s, Predators, F-16s, F-15s, MC-12 passenger planes" – and Bagram, he concludes, "is starting to feel like a dynamic exurb before the housing bubble burst."

I won't lie. As I read that post, my heart sank and I found myself imagining Spencer Ackerman writing this passage: "Anyone who thinks the United States is really going to stay in Afghanistan after July 2011 needs to come to this giant air base an hour away from Kabul where buildings are being dismantled, military equipment packed up, and everywhere you look you see evidence of a transient presence." To pen that, unfortunately, he would have to be a novelist or a fabulist.

For almost nine years, the U.S. military has been building up Bagram. Now, the Obama administration's response to the Afghan disaster on its hands is – and who, at this late date, could be surprised? – a further build-up. In my childhood, I remember ads for... well, I'm not quite sure what... but they showed scenes of

multiple error, including, if I remember rightly, five-legged cows floating through clouds. They were always tagged with a question that went something like: What's wrong with this picture?

As with so much that involves the American way of war, the U.S. national security state, and the vast military and intelligence bureaucracies that go with them, an outsider might well be tempted to ask just that question. As much as Washington insiders may periodically decry or bemoan the results of our war policies and security-state procedures, however, they never ask what's wrong. Not really.

In fact, basic alternatives to our present way of going about things are regularly dismissed out of hand, while ways to use force and massive preparations for the future use of more force are endlessly refined.

As a boy, I loved reading books of what-if history and science fiction, rare moments when what might have happened or what might someday happen outweighed what everyone was convinced must happen. Only there did it seem possible to imagine the unimaginable and the alternatives that might go with it. When it comes to novels, counterfactuals are still a winner. What if the Nazis had won in Europe, as Robert Harris suggested in *Fatherland*, or a strip of the Alaskan panhandle had become a temporary homeland for Jewish refugees from the Holocaust, as Michael Chabon suggested in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, or our machines could indeed think like us, as Philip Dick wondered in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? Such novels allow our brain to venture down strange new pathways normally forbidden to us.

Here, then, are five possibilities, five pathways, that – given our world – verge



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on the fictional. Consider them not “what-if history,” but “what if Washington...?”

**1. What if Washington declared a cease-fire in Afghanistan, expressed a desire to withdraw all its troops from the country in good order and at a reasonable pace, and then just left?**

What would happen? The answer is: as with the four questions below, we simply don't – and won't – know; in part because few of the 854,000 people with “top-secret” security clearances, and so perhaps capable of accessing Washington's war planning, are likely to think seriously about what this might mean. (It would be hell on a career, and there's no money in it anyway.)

On the other hand, after nine years of grim experimentation, we do know what has happened and is happening in the world's second most corrupt, fifth poorest country. If you've been following the Afghan War story, even in the most cursory manner, you could already write the next news report on Afghanistan's hapless American-trained police and its no less hapless American-trained army, the next set of civilian casualties, the next poppy harvest, the fate of the next round of counterinsurgency plans, and so on. These are, as our previous Secretary of Defense used to say, the “known knowns” of the situation and, unfortunately, the only subjects Washington is comfortable exploring further. No matter that the known road, the well-worn one, is the assured road to nowhere.

No serious thought, money, or effort goes into imagining how to unbuild the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan or how to voluntarily leave that country. In a terrible moment in the Vietnam War, Vermont Senator George Aiken suggested

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that the U.S. just declare victory and get out. But that sort of thing was, and remains, beyond Washington's normal imagination; and what Washington can't imagine, it assumes no one else should.

The American peace movement, such as it is, shouldn't wait for President Obama. It should convene its own blue-ribbon commission and put some effort into planning how to get out of Afghanistan voluntarily – and, having already done much harm, how to leave in the least harmful and quickest way possible. It's true that we don't know what would happen afterwards: Would the Taliban (or its various groupings) take over part or all of the country, or would they leap for each others' throats once a unifying opposition to foreign invaders disappeared (as happened in Afghanistan in the early 1990s)? Or, for that matter, might something quite unexpected and unpredictable happen?

The future is, by definition, an unknown unknown, and Washington, whatever its pretenses to control that future, has a terrible record when it comes to predicting it. Who knows how long it would take the Afghan people to deal with the Taliban without us, given the woeful inability of such a crew – second only to Afghan President Hamid Karzai's – to govern the country effectively (or less than brutally).

**2. What if a blue-ribbon commission appointed by the president surveyed the 17 intelligence agencies and organizations that make up the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC), the 263 intelligence task forces and other new intelligence groupings that have come into being since September 11, 2001, alone, the labyrinthine "community" that is drowning in 50,000 or more "intelligence" reports a year,**



**Is there really safety in a bloated intelligence bureaucracy and the dollars it eats, in all those satellites and all that surveillance, in a maturing culture of all-enveloping secrecy that is now a signature aspect of our way of life?**

**and decided that we had 16 too many of them?**

The last time such a commission met, after the 9/11 attacks, the result was that the seventeenth member of the IC was added to the roster, the office of the Director of National Intelligence, which, while proving remarkably ineffective by all accounts, has become a little bureaucracy of its own with about 1,500 employees.

What if such a panel were then to consider the obvious: that 17 competing intelligence agencies are a sign of madness when it comes to producing usable "intelligence"; that, while capable of being intrusive and oppressive, eating up more than \$75 billion annually, contributing to a national atmosphere of fear, and throwing a penumbra of secrecy over the nation, they are incapable of doing their job. What if it were to suggest that we need only one, or for competitive purposes, at most two such agencies, and that they should be geared to assessing the world and providing actual "intelligence" to the president and Congress, not to changing it by subverting foreign governments, assassinating foreign leaders or assorted terrorists, kidnapping citizens from the streets of global cities, and the like? What if Congress agreed? Would we be better off? Is there really safety in a bloated intelligence bureaucracy and the dollars it eats, in all those satellites and all that surveillance, in a maturing culture of all-enveloping secrecy that is now a signature aspect of our way of life?

**3. What if the president and Congress agreed to get rid of all secret armies, including the CIA, which Chalmers Johnson once dubbed the president's "private army," and the military's secret military, its special operations forces, 13,000 of whom are now on duty in 75 countries?**

What if, in addition, we were to demobilize the tens of thousands of armed private contractors and assorted rent-a-guns the Pentagon and the State Department have taken on to supplement their strength?

**4. What if the president and Congress really went after the Pentagon budget, projected to top \$700 billion next year, including war-fighting costs (and that's without all the long-term costs of our military even added in)**

Right now, proposed Pentagon budget “cuts” fill the headlines and yet represent nothing more than a reshuffling of military money in the midst of ongoing increases in defense spending. What if, instead, we actually cut that budget not by 25%, but in half or more, and used that money to promote our long-term safety through the creation of new jobs to work on the country's aging infrastructure? That would still leave us putting more money into our military than any other nation on Earth.

What if, in addition, we stopped pouring money into planning breakthrough generations of weapons for 2025 and beyond? What if, while we're at it, we decided to toss out the post-World War II definition of our mission as “national security,” a phrase which helped pave the way for the full-scale garrisoning of the globe and the repeated dispatching of U.S. forces to the far reaches of the planet, and went back to the idea of “national defense.” What if, in the same spirit, the Pentagon once again became an actual department of defense?

**5. What if the Department of Homeland Security were abolished (and along with it, that un-American post-9/11 word “homeland” were banished from the lan-**



**What if, in the same spirit, the Pentagon once again became an actual department of defense?**

**guage)? What if its pre-2002 constituent parts were reassigned to non-national security duties and the rest of it to the trashbin of history, ensuring that we no longer had two defense departments?**

In Washington's world, each of these what-ifs is, by definition, an absurdity, the sort of thing that only a utopian peacenik with his head in the sand could conjure up. And however badly our world seems to go, however misplaced our priorities and our moneys seem to be, Washington looks like it has all the facts and those who might raise such questions none, because no one ever seriously explores such ideas, no less tests them out (even in more modest ways).

As a result, they exist not in the realm of policy, but in the realm of fiction, and comments on the strangeness of those five-legged cows floating through distant clouds near Hellfire-armed Predator drones are left to marginal characters like me. What, after all, would we do without our national security wars, our ever-burgeoning intelligence bureaucracy, our secret armies, our advanced weaponry, a Pentagon the size of James's giant peach, and a special department to protect our “homeland” security (accompanied by its own mini-homeland-security-industrial complex and attendant lobbyists)? How would we know what was coming at us next? How could we be safe?

Right now, as a nation, we find it remarkably difficult to imagine ourselves as anything but what we now believe ourselves to be – and Washington counts on that. We find it almost impossible to imagine ourselves as just another nation (even perhaps, a more modest and better one), making our way on this disturbed planet of ours as best we can. We can't imagine ourselves “safe” without being dominant, or being dominant without

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killing others in distant lands in significant numbers to ensure that safety; nor can we imagine ourselves dominant without that full panoply of secret armies, global garrisons, overlapping spy agencies, fear manias, and all the money that goes with them, despite the abundant evidence that this can't be safety, either for us or for the planet.

We no longer know what a policy of cautious peace might look like, not having put a cent into envisioning such a project.

War and an aggressive global national security state (and the language that goes with it) are all Washington knows and all it cares to know. It is completely invested in the world it now so shakily oversees, and cares for no other.

Worlds end, of course, and they regularly end so much uglier when no one plans for the unexpected. Maybe one of these days, what-if fever will spread in this country and, miraculously, we'll actually get change we can finally believe in.

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