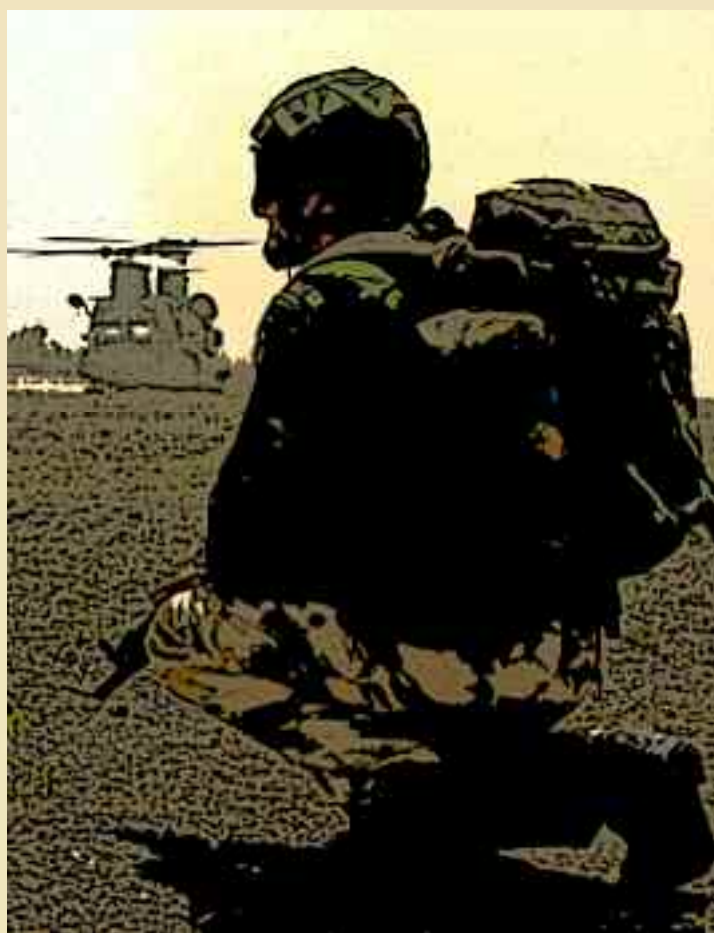


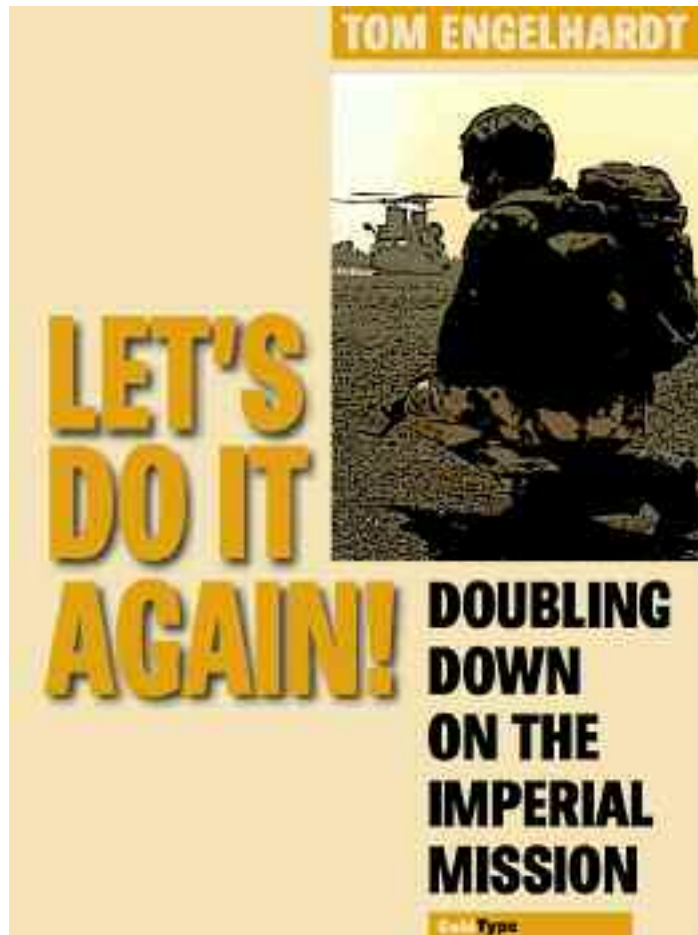
TOM ENGELHARDT



**LET'S
DO IT
AGAIN!**

**DOUBLING
DOWN
ON THE
IMPERIAL
MISSION**

ColdType



Tom Engelhardt, who runs the Nation Institute's Tomdispatch.com ("a regular antidote to the mainstream media"), is the co-founder of the American Empire Project and, most recently, the author of *Mission Unaccomplished: Tomdispatch Interviews with American Iconoclasts and Dissenters* (Nation Books), the first collection of Tomdispatch interviews.

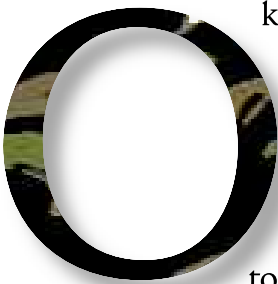
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Okay, folks, it's time for a sermon. And like any good sermon, this one will be based on illustrative texts, in this case from 2006, and inspirational passages plucked from them. Its goal, as in any such quest, will be to reveal a world normally hidden from us in our daily lives. Every day, it seems, essential choices are being made in our names by our top officials, civilian and military, many of whom, as the year ended, only reaffirmed that our country is headed down an imperial path in the Middle East and elsewhere, a path based on dreams of domination and backed, above all else, by the principle of force. No matter their disagreements over the administration's Iraq catastrophe, on this, agreement has remained so widespread as to make all discussion of the basics seem beside the point. Despite recent failures on the imperial path, consideration of other paths remains almost inconceivable.

Naturally, the continual act of choosing the path we are on, and the hardly noticed Pentagonization and Homeland Securitization of our own society that goes with it are never presented to Americans as such. If no alternatives to what we are doing are ever suggested, then logic is with the doers, no matter the staggering problems on the horizon.

In fact, what we do in the world – how, for instance, we choose to garrison the planet – is seldom presented as a matter of choice at all. Either it's been forced on us by "them" – the rogues, the jihadis, the madmen, the evil ones – and so is the only path to our obvious safety (as defined by our betters in Washington); or it's so obvious that nothing needs to be done but reaffirm it.

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As in all Washington debates at this moment, what's truly important is simply to decide how to make that imperial path less rocky and those dreams of domination that pass for American "security" more achievable (or even, as in Iraq, less noticeably catastrophic).

End of introduction to sermon. Now to the illustrative texts and examples:

Expand the Mission

For my first text, let me take an e-letter that the college-age daughter of a friend received the other day from a Marine Corps Officer Selection Officer, inviting her to "an awesome summer training program called the Platoon Leader's Course." Think of it as Marine Corps summer camp. No uniforms ("This is not ROTC!"), but reasonable amounts of moolah. Here's some of what was on offer to her, part of a desperate military's Iraq-era appeal to citizenly duty:

"You will earn approximately \$2,400 (six weeks) or \$4,000 (ten weeks) plus room and board during the training. How's that for a summer job?... You will not incur any obligation to the Marine Corps even after completing the training. (You can choose whether or not to continue with the program)... Tuition assistance will be available to you after you complete training this summer. You could potentially earn \$8,000 to \$25,000 for school, depending on graduation date."

Imagine! The Marine Corps is willing to pay young people to go to a uniform-less summer camp to test their "leadership potential," with no commitment to the Corps necessary. Consider that; then consider what was certainly the President's only significant decision of the holiday season past – to permanently expand the U.S. military by as many as 70,000 troops.

Now, as in some old math problem, the question is: How do you connect these two points. (Hint: Not with a straight line.)

Faced with a public shot across the bow in testimony before Congress by Army Chief of Staff Peter J. Schoomaker, who warned that the Army "will break" under present war-zone rotation needs, President Bush responded on December 19th. He brought up the "stressed" nature of the U.S. Armed Forces and, while still officially hesitating about his "way forward" in Iraq, said, "I'm inclined to believe that we do need to increase our troops – the Army, the Marines. And I talked

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about this to Secretary [Robert A.] Gates, and he is going to spend some time talking to the folks in the building [the Pentagon], come back with a recommendation to me about how to proceed forward on this idea." All this was, he added, "to meet the challenges of a long-term global struggle against terrorists."

Ah... that makes things clearer.

Of course, to get those new "volunteer" officers and men, who have generally been none too eager to volunteer for the Army and the Marines in the midst of a disastrous, far-away, increasingly incomprehensible set of double wars, you'll have to pay even more kids more money to go to no-commitment summer camp; and, while you're at it, you'll have to lower standards for the military radically. You'll have to let in even more volunteers without high-school diplomas but with "moral" and medical "waivers" for criminal records and mental problems. You'll have to fast-track even more new immigrants willing to join for the benefits of quick citizenship; you'll have to ramp up already high cash bonuses of all sorts; you'll have to push the top-notch ad agency recently hired on a five-year contract for a cool billion dollars to rev up its new "Army Strong" recruitment drive even higher; you'll certainly have to jack up the numbers of military recruiters radically, to the tune of perhaps a couple of hundred million more dollars; and maybe just for the heck of it, you better start planning for the possibility of recruiting significant numbers of potential immigrants before they even think to leave their own countries. After all, it's darn romantic to imagine a future American all-volunteer force that will look more like the old French Foreign Legion – or an army of mercenaries anyway. All in all, you'll have to commit to the fact that your future soldier in your basic future war will cost staggering sums of money to hire and even more staggering sums to retain after he or she has had a taste of what "leadership potential" really entails.

Put another way, as long as Iraq remains a classic quagmire for the Army and Marines, any plan to expand the U.S. military in order to make it easier to fight such wars in the future, threatens to become a classic financial quagmire as well. In other words, Iraq and military expansion don't fit together well at all. And yet, looking at the state of our military in Iraq in a certain light, expansion seems so... well, logical.

After all, the American military, now at just over 500,000 troops, stood, at the

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time of the First Gulf War, at 703,000. (Of course, no one now counts the quite expensive hired mercenaries who envelop our military – the privatized, Halliburton-style adjuncts, who cook the food, build the bases, do the cleaning, deliver the mail and supplies, perform interrogation duties, and so on, and whose increase has been striking as has the growth of rent-a-mercenary corporations whose armed employees are, for instance, all over Iraq.) In addition, it has long been clear that the Armed Forces could not take the strain of failing wars in Central Asia and the Middle East forever, not to speak of increased "commitments" in the Persian Gulf and the normal massive global basing and policing that the Pentagon regularly refers to as our "footprint" on the planet. Added to this, the President seems to be leaning towards increasingly the pressure on military manpower needs by "surging" – the Vietnam era word would, of course, have been "escalating" – up to 30,000 troops into Baghdad and al-Anbar province, while naval and air forces (with an obvious eye to Iran) are simultaneously ramped up in the Persian Gulf.

In light of Iraq, military manpower needs cry out to be dealt with. In light of Iraq, dealing with them any time soon will be prohibitively expensive.

In Washington, this conundrum leads nowhere in particular. Instead, in the spirit of imperial-mission logic (and with the urge to bash the Bush administration for being late to such an obvious support-our-troops position), Democrats simply leaped onto the expand-the-military bandwagon even faster than Republicans. In fact, leading Democrats had long been calling for just this sort of expansion. ("I am glad [the President] has realized the need for increasing the size of the armed forces... but this is where the Democrats have been for two years," commented Rep. Rahm Emanuel, the new House Democratic Caucus chairman.) The Democratic leadership promptly pledged to make such an expansion one of its top reform priorities in the New Year.

To get those numbers significantly higher will, it's estimated, take a decade and unimaginable sums of money (as well as those lowered standards). And, if the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan worsen, as they almost certainly will, and American casualties rise with no end in sight, you can start going through your multiplication tables. This could be considered but a form of ongoing blowback from American imperial shock-and-awe tactics in Iraq and presents some curious choices to our leaders. After all, to take but one example, those most eager to

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expand the military, with their eyes on the imperial future, should be eager to liquidate the Iraqi mission as soon as possible.

But a far more basic choice lurks – one rarely alluded to in the mainstream. If we voted on such things – and, in truth, we vote on less and less that matters – the choice that actually lies behind the Marine e-letter to my friend's daughter might be put this way: Expand the military or shrink the mission?

This is the essential question that goes largely unmentioned – and largely unthought as well. In the meantime, money will continue to pour into military recruitment ad campaigns, bonuses, and summer camps. In the meantime, those Marine e-letters will continue to go out. In the meantime, money will continue to pour into the Pentagon and the national security world generally. In the meantime, we will continue to build our near billion-dollar embassy, the largest on the planet, in the heart of Baghdad's Green Zone. In the meantime, the imperial and military paths will continue to fuse, and the Pentagon will continue to take on new roles, even outside "declared war zones," in intelligence, diplomacy, "information operations," and other "self-assigned missions"; so that, as Mark Mazzetti of the New York Times recently described it, even our embassies will increasingly be militarized outposts in the global war on terror.

Shrinking the mission – choosing some path other than the imperial one (in part by redefining what exactly our national interests are) – would, of course, address many problems. It would make paying young people thousands of dollars to test their leadership potential or thinking about scouring Central America for a future Foreign Legion far less necessary. But no one in Washington – not in the Bush administration, not in James A. Baker's Iraq Study Group, which recently captured the Inside-the-Beltway "middle ground" on Iraq policy, not in the Democratic leadership – is faintly interested in shrinking the American global mission. No one in Washington, where a kind of communal voting does go on, is about to vote "no" to that mission, or cast a ballot for democracy rather than empire.

Expanding the military may seem like a no-brainer in response to the Iraq crisis. As it happens, it's anything but. Unfortunately, few ever discuss (as, for instance, Chalmers Johnson did in his book, *The Sorrows of Empire*) the 700-plus military and intelligence bases we retain around the world or ask why exactly we're garrisoning the planet. No one, in these last years, has seriously challenged the

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ever expanding Pentagon budget; nor the mushrooming supplemental requests for Iraq and Afghanistan, including the record-setting latest for almost \$100 billion; nor, generally, the fact that paying for actual war-fighting is no longer considered an appropriate part of the Pentagon's normal budget process.

No one challenged it when, in 2002, the United States gained a new North American Command (Northcom), making U.S. citizens but another coequal part of the Pentagon's division of its imperial world, along with those who live in regions covered by Centcom, Paccom, and the just authorized Africa Command (Africom). No one challenged the vast expansion of Pentagon intelligence activities. No one offered a challenge as the military took on ever more civilian domestic duties, including planning for the potential arrival of a pandemic disease on our shores or for future Katrinas. No one seriously challenges the plans the Pentagon has on the drawing boards for exotic, futuristic hardware meant to come on line decades from now that, along with futuristic military tactics already being worked out, will help predetermine the wars most Americans don't even know we are going to fight – from the vast mega-slum-cities of the Third World to the borderlands of space.

No one considers what the Pentagonization of our world and the Homeland Securitization of our country is doing to us, because militarism here has never taken on the expectable forms – few vast military parades or displays (despite the almost full-scale militarization of Presidential funerals); few troops in the streets; no uniforms in the high councils of government. In fact, it's one of the ironies of our particular form of militarization that when our military – no longer really a citizen army – goes to war and troops begin to die, less Americans are touched by this than perhaps at any time in our recent history.

Shrink the mission or expand the military? Your choice?

Fat chance.

An Expeditionary Mentality

Like all crucial questions, the one never asked nonetheless remains deeply embedded in our most essential texts as in our lives and our world. All you have to do is keep an eye out and you can catch endless examples of the choices that have already been made for us – and are being regularly ratified

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in our names, but largely without our knowledge or the slightest consultation by the men (and they are largely men) who define what an American world is supposed to mean and simply can't imagine it any other way.

Let me just offer a few illustrative and largely overlooked gems from 2006 (with modest commentary):

Last May, in the opening statement at his confirmation hearings before the Senate Intelligence Committee for the post of Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, General Michael Hayden, former head of the National Security Agency, offered the following promise to Congress:

"If confirmed as Director, I would reaffirm CIA's proud culture of risk-taking and excellence, particularly through the increased use of non-traditional operational platforms, a greater focus on the development of language skills, and the inculcation of what I would call an expeditionary mentality."

"An expeditionary mentality" – in order to "keep America safe." The phrase, so Kiplingesque, so British Empire, did not so much as draw a comment from the assembled Senators or a peep from the press. While much in Hayden's testimony was highlighted, this essential promise passed essentially unnoticed. And why should that surprise anyone? After the tenure of the previous two directors, George "Slam Dunk" Tenet and the ham-handed Republican Party hack Porter Goss, it was, in the Washington context, a simple promise of performance enhancement. On the imperial path, after all, an expeditionary mentality is a perfectly reasonable thing to have.

Let's Do It Again!

Or consider the following comment from Col. Conrad Crane, director of the U.S. Army Military History Institute and a key figure in overseeing the production and recent release of a 279-page joint Army/Marine Counterinsurgency Field Manual.

"If we've created a manual that is just good for Iraq and Afghanistan, we've failed... This thing has got to be focused on the future and the next time we do this."

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The next time we do this. Okay, call that realism along the imperial path. After all, if somehow, post-Vietnam, the U.S. military was in denial about waging future counterinsurgency wars, it's perfectly logical to assume that it shouldn't be again; not if these are to be "our" wars of the future. Or as another of the key drafters of the guidebook, Lt. Col. John A. Nagl put it, "We are codifying the best practices of previous counterinsurgency campaigns and the lessons we have learned from Iraq and Afghanistan to help our forces succeed in the current fight and prepare for the future."

And yet, like so much else, that counterinsurgency how-to-do-it is also a functional vote for an imperial mission few of us have ever had the chance to really consider, no less opt for. And why is it that when I read Crane's comment, I think to myself – as if I were a parent dealing with thoughtless children – no, no, the lesson of our moment isn't: Do it right the next time. It's: Don't do it!

"We're Going to Be Here a Long Time"

But you can hardly blame Colonels Conrad and Nagl, not when just about all strands of official thought in and around Washington point toward those future wars. On the one hand, we have the latest neoconservative proposal, direct from the American Enterprise Institute, promoted personally to the President by former vice chief of staff of the U.S. Army Gen. Jack Keane and AEI star Frederick Kagan, and heavily lobbied for by presidential candidate Sen. John McCain. It calls for Bush to order a "surge" of 30,000 or more American troops (long term) into what former counterterrorism tsar Richard Clarke now calls the "Iraqi sinkhole." These are the people who, as Inter Press Service analyst Jim Lobe commented recently, are intent on making "one final effort... to persuade the president that, by 'doubling down' on his gamble on Iraq, he can still leave the table a winner and 'transform' the entire Middle East."

If taken, this will be but the latest in a long line of gambler's choices on the neocon imperial path to remaking the Middle East. And while others in Washington or Iraq, including top U.S. commanders, may not back such an obviously wobbly policy decision, doubling down on the imperial path itself is another matter entirely. News reports in late December indicated that the U.S.

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and Britain were already deploying a new set of warships to the Persian Gulf, possibly including a second American aircraft-carrier task force, which would join the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower already on station there. No one had any doubt that these moves were aimed at Iran.

In the meantime, our new Secretary of Defense Robert A. Gates, until recently a member of the "realist" Iraq Study Group, sent in from Papa Bush's world to clean up the mess in Baghdad, made his first official trip to the Iraqi capital to meet with American commanders. While those ships headed Gulf-ward, he had a few choice things to say on the subject of the American imperial mission in the Middle East. In a breakfast meeting with American soldiers, he offered the following:

"[W]e need to make damn sure that the neighbors understand we're going to be here a long time, 'here' meaning the Persian Gulf area, not necessarily here in Iraq."

That this was no passing spontaneous outburst he made clear with this comment in a press briefing:

"I think the message that we are sending to everyone, not just Iran, is that the United States is an enduring presence in this part of the world. We have been here for a long time. We will be here for a long time and everybody needs to remember that – both our friends and those who might consider themselves our adversaries."

When the "realist" Secretary of Defense talks in this fashion about our enduring regional "footprint," he's voting for the imperial path in the name of all Americans. He's also reminding us that, with every passing moment, that path and the military one are becoming a single way into the future. He's ensuring that when our counterinsurgency warriors, armed with their latest weaponry and manuals, hit the sands of wherever, they won't sound that different from the soldier at that breakfast in Iraq who described what it's like to "advise" the Iraqi military: "The more they work with us, the more they're slowly picking up on our traits. I mean, you see them sort of starting trying to act like us and stuff, and it's good; you know, little brother trying to act like a big brother..."

This is offered in the same patronizing imperial spirit in which President Bush,

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Donald Rumsfeld, and others once talked about teaching the Iraqi child how to ride the "bike" of democracy and debated when to take off the "training wheels." It helps explain why our imperial path and that giant "footprint," all of which seem so natural to us as hardly to be an imposition on others, appeal so little elsewhere in the world. It helps explain why no counterinsurgency guide, no deployment of aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf, no upping of the Pentagon budget, or sending of "intelligence" agents, military or CIA, into the universe with an "expeditionary mentality," will ever make this planet a comfortable, conquerable, garrison-able place. It helps explain just why the imperial path is ever more costly.

Flies and Sledgehammers

Recently, deputy director for the war on terrorism within the Strategic Plans Office of the Pentagon's Joint Staff, Gen. Mark O. Schissler, told the Washington Times,

"We're in a generational war. You can try and fight the enemy where they are and where they're attacking you, or prevent them and defend your own homeland... [Islamist extremists are] absolutely committed to the 50-100-year plan."

It was a typical comment of our moment in which "they" invariably leave helpless us no other option but to prepare for their 100-year or multigenerational struggle.

So, with us headed down what various administration officials have long thought of as a century-long path of war, let me conclude this little sermon by returning to the Marine recruitment e-letter my friend's daughter received. It ends with an encouraging challenge: "This is an unparalleled opportunity to see if you have what it takes to be a leader in one of the most elite organizations in the world without committing yourself to service." Then, after the recruiting officer's sign-off, comes what clearly is meant to be an inspirational quote for the prospective military leader of America's future:

"Sometimes killing a fly with a sledgehammer is entirely appropriate. It doesn't make the fly any more dead, but the rest of the flies sure sit up and take notice. – Major I. L. Holdridge, USMC"

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Retired Marine Major Holdridge, it turns out, is the creator of a video game, TacOps, used by military trainers and available in commercial form. His comment reminded me of something Boston Globe columnist James Carroll said in a Tomdispatch interview back in September 2005. Carroll was pointing out that George Bush's response to the 9/11 attacks was partly a result of his particular character (and faith) and partly of what was available to him in our "arsenal" of responses, so to speak – because the process of Pentagonization, of militarization, had already been underway in this country for so long.

"The meshing of Bush's temperament and a long-prepared American institutional response was unfortunate, but there it was. As somebody said, when he turned to his tool bag to respond to the mosquito of Osama bin Laden, the only tool he had in it was a hammer, so he brought it down on Afghanistan and destroyed it; then he brought it down on Iraq and destroyed it, missing the mosquito, of course."

Rest assured, as the year 2007 begins, our imperialists and militarists are deep into preparations for General Schissler's 100 Year War. They are already producing the next set of sledgehammers, the next set of military responses, for our next set of crises. At this point, it would be shocking (not to say awesome) if these weren't sooner or later applied.

Expand the military or shrink the mission?

Americans may never vote on this question, symbolic as it is of the critical choices being made in our name; but make no mistake, the rest of the world is already "voting" – some literally on ballots, as in Latin America; some by arms (and polls), as in the Middle East; some via old-style great power politics, as in Central Asia. Americans may not know it, but the mission is shrinking, even as the weaponry grows ever more dangerous and the imperial path gets ever bumpier, more potholed, better mined. Expanding the military will only increase the costs in every sense of the word.



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