“Permanent War” by Chris Hedges, excerpt from Death of the Liberal Class, Nation Books, 2010

One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun.
-REINHOLD NIEBUHR, Beyond Tragedy

SINCE THE END of World War I, the United States has devoted staggering resources and money to battling real and imagined enemies. It turned the engines of the state over to a massive war and security apparatus. These battles, which have created an Orwellian state illusion of permanent war, neutered all opposition to corporate power and the tepid reforms of the liberal class. The liberal class, fearful of being branded as soft or unpatriotic in the Cold War, willingly joined the state's campaign to crush popular and radical movements in the name of national security.

Permanent war is the most effective mechanism used by the power elite to stifle reform and muzzle dissent. A state of war demands greater secrecy, constant vigilance and suspicion. It generates distrust and fear, especially in culture and art, often reducing it to silence or nationalist cant. It degrades and corrupts education and the media. It wrecks the economy. It nullifies public opinion. And it forces liberal institutions to sacrifice their beliefs for a holy crusade, a kind of surrogate religion, whether it is against the Hun, the Bolshevik, the fascist, the communist, or the Islamic terrorist. The liberal class in a state of permanent war is rendered impotent.

Dwight Macdonald warned of the ideology of permanent war in his 1946 essay The Root Is Man. He despaired of an effective counterweight to the power of the corporate state as long as a state of permanent war continued to exist. The liberal class, like the Marxist cadre from which Macdonald had defected in favor of anarchism, had, he wrote, mistakenly placed its hopes for human progress in the state. This was a huge error. The state, once the repository of hope for the liberal class and many progressives, devoured its children in America as well as in the Soviet Union. And the magic elixir, the potent opiate that rendered a population passive and willing to be stripped of power, was a state of permanent war.

The political uses of the ideology of perpetual war eluded the theorists behind the nineteenth- and early twentieth- century reform and social movements, including Karl Marx. The reformists limited their focus to internal class struggle and, as Macdonald noted, never worked out "an adequate theory of the political significance of war." Until that gap is filled, Macdonald warned, "modern socialism will continue to have a somewhat academic flavor."

The collapse of liberalism, whether in imperial Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Weimar Germany, the former Yugoslavia, or the United States, was intimately tied to the rise of a culture of permanent war. Within such a culture, exploitation and violence, even against citizens, are justified to protect the nation. The chant for war comes in a variety of slogans, languages, and ideologies. It can manifest itself in fascist salutes, communist show trials, campaigns of ethnic cleansing, or Christian crusades. It is all the same. It is a crude, terrifying state repression by the power elite and the mediocrities in the liberal class who serve them, in the name of national security.
It was a decline into permanent war, not Islam, that killed the liberal, democratic movements in the Arab world, movements that held great promise in the early part of the twentieth century in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. The same prolonged state of permanent war killed the liberal classes in Israel and the United States. Permanent war, which reduces all to speaking in the simplified language of nationalism, is a disease. It strips citizens of rights. It reduces all communication to patriotic cant. It empowers those who profit from the state in the name of war. And it corrodes and diminishes democratic debate and institutions.

"War," Randolph Bourne remarked, "is the health of the state."

U.S. military spending, which consumes half of all discretionary spending, has had a profound social and political cost. Bridges and levees collapse. Schools decay. Domestic manufacturing declines. Trillions in debt threaten the viability of the currency and the economy. The poor, the mentally ill, the sick, and the unemployed are abandoned. Human suffering is the price for victory, which is never finally defined or attainable.

The corporations that profit from permanent war need us to be afraid. Fear stops us from objecting to government spending on a bloated military. Fear means we will not ask unpleasant questions of those in power. Fear permits the government to operate in secret. Fear means we are willing to give up our rights and liberties for promises of security. The imposition of fear ensures that the corporations that wrecked the country cannot be challenged. Fear keeps us penned in like livestock.

Dick Cheney and George W. Bush may be palpably evil while Obama is merely weak, but to those who seek to keep us in a state of permanent war, such distinctions do not matter. They get what they want. The liberal class, like Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, can no longer influence a society in a state of permanent war and retreats into its sheltered enclaves, where its members can continue to worship themselves. The corridors of liberal institutions are filled with Underground men and women. They decry the social chaos for which they bear responsibility, but do nothing. They nurse an internal bitterness and mounting distaste for the wider society. And, because of their self-righteousness, elitism, and hypocrisy, they are despised.

The institutional church, when it does speak, mutters pious non-statements. It seeks to protect its vision of itself as a moral voice and yet avoids genuine confrontations with the power elite. It speaks in a language filled with moral platitudes. We can hear such language in a letter written March 25, 2003, by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, head of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, telling his priests that Catholic soldiers could morally fight in the second Iraq war: "Given the complexity of factors involved, many of which understandably remain confidential, it is altogether appropriate for members of our armed forces to presume the integrity of our leadership and its judgments, and therefore to carry out their military duties in good conscience." The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops told believers that Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was a menace, and that reasonable people could disagree about the necessity of using force to overthrow him. It assured those who supported the war that God would not object. B'nai B'rith supported a congressional resolution to authorize the 2003 attack on Iraq. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which represents Reform Judaism, agreed it would back unilateral action, as long as Congress approved and the president sought support from other nations. In a typical bromide, the National Council of Churches, which represents thirty-six different faith groups, urged President George W. Bush to "do all possible" to avoid war with Iraq and to stop "demonizing adversaries or enemies" with good-versus-evil rhetoric, but, like the other liberal religious institutions, did not condemn the war.
A Gallup Poll in 2006 found that "the more frequently an American attends church, the less likely he or she is to say the war was a mistake." Given that Jesus was a pacifist, and given that all of us who graduated from seminary rigorously studied just war doctrine, a doctrine flagrantly violated by the invasion of Iraq, this is startling.

The attraction of the right wing, and the war-makers, is that they appear to have the courage of their convictions. When someone like Sarah Palin posts a map with crosshairs centering on Democratic districts, when she favors a slogan such as "Don't Retreat, Instead-RELOAD!," there are desperate people listening who are cleaning their weapons. When Christian fascists stand in the pulpits of mega-churches and denounce Obama as the Antichrist, there are believers who listen. When during a 2010 House debate on the pending health-care bill, Republican lawmaker Randy Neugebauer shouts, "Baby killer!" at Michigan Democrat Bart Stupak, violent extremists nod their heads, seeing the mission of saving the unborn as a sacred duty. These zealots have little left to lose. We made sure of that. And the violence they inflict is an expression of the economic and institutional violence they endure.

These movements are not yet full-blown fascist movements. They do not openly call for the extermination of ethnic or religious groups. They do not openly advocate violence. But, as I was told by Fritz Stern, a scholar of fascism and a refugee from Nazi Germany, "In Germany there was a yearning for fascism before fascism was invented." This is the yearning that we now see, and it is dangerous. Stern, who sees similarities between the deterioration of the U.S. political system and the fall of Weimar Germany, warned against "a historic process in which resentment against a disenchanted secular world found deliverance in the ecstatic escape of unreason."

Societies that do not reincorporate the unemployed and the poor into the economy, giving them jobs and relief from crippling debt, become subject to the hysterical mass quest for ecstatic deliverance in unreason. The nascent racism and violence leaping up around the edges of U.S. society could become a full-blown conflagration. Attempts by the liberal class to create a more civil society, to respect difference, will be rejected by a betrayed populace along with the liberal class itself.

"One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out," the philosopher Richard Rorty warned in his book *Achieving Our Country*:

> Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. . . . All the sadism that the academic Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.

The hatred for radical Islam will transform itself into a hatred for Muslims. The hatred for undocumented workers in states such as Arizona will become a hatred for Mexicans and Central Americans. The hatred for those not defined as American patriots by a largely white mass movement will become a hatred for African Americans. The hatred for liberals will morph into a hatred for all democratic institutions, from universities and government agencies to cultural institutions and the media. In their continued impotence and cowardice, members of the liberal class will see themselves, and the values they support, swept aside.

The liberal class refused to resist the devolution of the U.S. democratic system into what Sheldon Wolin calls a system of inverted totalitarianism. Inverted totalitarianism, Wolin writes, represents "the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the
citizenry." Inverted totalitarianism differs from classical forms of totalitarianism, which revolve around a demagogue or charismatic leader. It finds its expression in the anonymity of the corporate state. The corporate forces behind inverted totalitarianism do not, as classical totalitarian movements do, replace decaying structures with new, revolutionary structures. They do not import new symbols and iconography. They do not offer a radical alternative. Corporate power purports, in inverted totalitarianism, to honor electoral politics, freedom, and the Constitution. But these corporate forces so corrupt and manipulate power as to make democracy impossible.

Inverted totalitarianism is not conceptualized as an ideology or objectified in public policy. It is furthered by "power-holders and citizens who often seem unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions," Wolin writes. But it is as dangerous as classical forms of totalitarianism. In a system of inverted totalitarianism, it is not necessary to rewrite the Constitution, as fascist and communist regimes would. It is enough to exploit legitimate power by means of judicial and legislative interpretation. This exploitation ensures that the courts, populated by justices selected and ratified by members of the corporate culture, rule that huge corporate campaign contributions are protected speech under the First Amendment. It ensures that heavily financed and organized lobbying by large corporations is interpreted as an application of the people's right to petition the government. Corporations are treated by the state as persons, as the increasingly conservative U.S. Supreme Court has more and more frequently ruled, except in those cases where the "persons" agree to a "settlement." Those within corporations who commit crimes can avoid going to prison by paying large sums of money to the government without "admitting any wrongdoing," according to this twisted judicial reasoning. There is a word for this: corruption.

Corporations have thirty-five thousand lobbyists in Washington and thousands more in state capitals that dole out corporate money to shape and write legislation. They use their political action committees to solicit employees and shareholders for donations to fund pliable candidates. The financial sector, for example, spent more than $5 billion on political campaigns, influence peddling, and lobbying during the past decade, which resulted in sweeping deregulation, the gouging of consumers, our global financial meltdown, and the subsequent looting of the U.S. Treasury. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America spent $26 million in 2009, and drug companies such as Pfizer, Amgen, and Eli Lilly kicked in tens of millions more to buy off the two parties. The so-called health-care reform bill will force citizens to buy a predatory and defective product, while taxpayers provide health-related corporations with hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies. The oil and gas industry, the coal industry, defense contractors, and telecommunications companies have thwarted the drive for sustainable energy and orchestrated the steady erosion of regulatory control and civil liberties. Politicians do corporate bidding and give lip service to burning political and economic issues. The liberal class is used as a prop to keep the fiction of the democratic state alive. The Constitution, Wolin writes, is "conscripted to serve as power's apprentice rather than its conscience."

There is no national institution left that can accurately be described as democratic. Citizens, rather than authentically participating in power, are have only virtual opinions, in what Charlotte Twight calls "participatory fascism." They are reduced to expressing themselves on issues that are meaningless, voting on American Idol or in polls conducted by the power elite. The citizens of Rome, stripped of political power, are allowed to vote to spare or kill a gladiator in the arena, a similar form of hollow public choice.

"Inverted totalitarianism reverses things," Wolin writes:
It is politics all of the time but a politics largely untempered by the political. Party squabbles are occasionally on public display, and there is a frantic and continuous politics among factions of the party, interest groups, competing corporate powers, and rival media concerns. And there is, of course, the culminating moment of national elections when the attention of the nation is required to make a choice of personalities rather than a choice between alternatives. What is absent is the political, the commitment to finding where the common good lies amidst the welter of well-financed, highly organized, single-minded interests rabidly seeking governmental favors and overwhelming the practices of representative government and public administration by a sea of cash.

Hollywood, the news industry, and television—all corporate controlled—have become instruments of inverted totalitarianism, as I illustrated in my book *Empire of Illusion*. They saturate the airwaves with manufactured controversy, whether it is the Tiger Woods sex scandal or the dispute between NBC late-night talk-show hosts Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien or the extramarital affair of John Edwards. We confuse knowledge with our potted responses to these non-events. And the draconian internal control employed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the military, and the police, coupled with the censorship, witting or unwitting, practiced by the corporate media, does for inverted totalitarianism what thugs and bonfires of prohibited books did in previous totalitarian regimes.

Liberals, socialists, trade unionists, independent journalists, and intellectuals, many of whom were once important voices in our society, have been banished or muzzled by corporate control throughout academia, culture, the media, and government. "It seems a replay of historical experience that the bias displayed by today's media should be aimed consistently at the shredded remains of liberalism," Wolin writes:

*Recall that an element common to most twentieth-century totalitarianism, whether Fascist or Stalinist, was hostility toward the left. In the United States, the left is assumed to consist solely of liberals, occasionally of "the left wing of the Democratic Party," never of democrats.*

The uniformity of opinion molded by the media is reinforced through the skillfully orchestrated mass emotions of nationalism and patriotism, which paint all dissidents as "soft" or "unpatriotic." The "patriotic" citizen, plagued by fear of job losses and possible terrorist attacks, unfailingly supports widespread surveillance and the militarized state. There is no questioning of the $1 trillion spent each year on defense. Military and intelligence agencies are held above government, as if somehow they are not part of the government. The most powerful instruments of state control effectively have no public oversight. We, as imperial citizens, are taught to be contemptuous of government bureaucracy, yet we stand like sheep before Homeland Security agents in airports and are mute when Congress permits our private correspondence and conversations to be monitored and archived. We endure more state control than at any time in U.S. history.

And yet the civic, patriotic, and political language we use to describe ourselves remains unchanged. We pay fealty to the same national symbols and iconography. We find our collective identity in the same national myths. We continue to deify the founding fathers. But the America we celebrate is an illusion. It does not exist.

The liberal class has aided and abetted this decline. Liberals, who claim to support the working class, vote for candidates who glibly defend NAFTA and increased globalization. Liberals, who claim to want an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, continue to back a party
that funds and expands these wars. Liberals, who say they are the champions of basic civil
liberties, do not challenge politicians who take these liberties from them.

Obama lies as cravenly, if not as crudely, as George W. Bush. He promised that the
transfer of $12.8 trillion in taxpayer money to Wall Street would open up credit and lending to the
average consumer following the financial crisis. It did not. The Federal Deposit Insurance
Corporation (FDIC) admitted that banks have reduced lending at the sharpest rate since 1942. As
a senator, Obama promised he would filibuster amendments to the Foreign Intelligence
Surveillance Act (FISA), which retroactively made legal the wiretapping and monitoring of
millions of American citizens without warrant; instead, he supported passage of that legislation.
He told us he would withdraw American troops from Iraq, close the Guantanamo Bay detention
camp, end torture, restore civil liberties such as habeas corpus, pass a health-care bill with a
robust public option, and create new jobs. Some troops have been withdrawn, slowly and
piecemeal, from Iraq, but other than this too-little-too-late process, almost none of his promises
has been kept.

He shoved a health-care bill down our throats that will mean ever-rising co-pays,
deductibles, and premiums and leave most of the seriously ill bankrupt and unable to afford
medical care. Obama, after promising meaningful environmental reform, did nothing to halt the
collapse of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, a decision that ended perhaps our final
chance to save the planet from the catastrophic effects of climate change. He empowers Israel's
brutal apartheid regime. He has expanded the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where hundreds
of civilians, including entire families, have been slaughtered by sophisticated weaponry such as
drones and the AGM-144 Hellfire missile, which sucks the air out of its victims' lungs. He is
delivering war and death to Yemen, Somalia, and, perhaps soon, he will bring it to Iran. Obama is
part of the political stagecraft that trades in perceptions of power rather than real power.

The illegal wars and occupations, the largest transference of wealth upward in U.S.
history, the deregulation that resulted in the environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and the
egregious assault on civil liberties—begun under George W. Bush—raise only a flicker of protest
from the liberal class. Liberals, unlike the right wing, are emotionally disabled. They appear not
to feel. They do not recognize the legitimate anger of those who have been dispossessed. They
retreat instead into the dead talk of policy and analysis. The Tea Party protesters, the myopic
supporters of Sarah Palin, the veterans signing up for Oath Keepers, and myriad groups of armed
patriots have brought into their ranks legions of dispossessed workers, angry libertarians, John
Birchers, and many others who, until now, were never politically active.

The three-thousand-word suicide note left by Joe Stack, who flew his Piper Dakota into
an Internal Revenue Service office in Austin, Texas, on February 18, 2010, murdering an IRS
worker and injuring thirteen others, two seriously, expressed the frustration of tens of millions of
workers over the treachery of global corporations and a liberal class that abandoned them.

Stack, in his note, remembered that when he was an eighteen- or nineteen- year-old
student living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, he occupied an apartment next to an elderly widow.
The woman had been married to a steel worker, who, Stack wrote, "had worked all his life in the
steel mills of central Pennsylvania with promises from big business and the union that, for his
thirty years of service, he would have a pension and medical care to look forward to in his
retirement." But the worker got nothing "because the incompetent mill management and corrupt
union (not to mention the government) raided their pension funds and stole their retirement." The
widow survived on Social Security.
"In retrospect, the situation was laughable because here I was living on peanut butter and bread (or Ritz crackers when I could afford to splurge) for months at a time," he wrote:

When I got to know this poor figure and heard her story I felt worse for her plight than for my own (I, after all, thought I had everything in front of me). I was genuinely appalled at one point, as we exchanged stories and commiserated with each other over our situations, when she in her grandmotherly fashion tried to convince me that I would be "healthier" eating cat food (like her) rather than trying to get all my substance from peanut butter and bread. I couldn't quite go there, but the impression was made. I decided that I didn't trust big business to take care of me, and that I would take responsibility for my own future and myself.

Stack's life, like Ernest Logan Bell's, soon made clear that the corporate government served its own interests at the expense of the citizen. And the liberal class and its institutions, including labor unions, the media, and the Democratic Party, would not defend them.

"Why is it that a handful of thugs and plunderers can commit unthinkable atrocities (and in the case of the GM executives, for scores of years) and when it's time for their gravy train to crash under the weight of their glutony and overwhelming stupidity, the force of the full federal government has no difficulty coming to their aid within days if not hours?" Stack wrote:

Yet at the same time, the joke we call the American medical system, including the drug and insurance companies, are murdering tens of thousands of people a year and stealing from the corpses and victims they cripple, and this country's leaders don't see this as important as bailing out a few of their vile, rich cronies. Yet, the political "representatives" (thieves, liars, and self-serving scumbags are far more accurate) have endless time to sit around for year after year and debate the state of the "terrible health care problem." It's clear they see no crisis as long as the dead people don't get in the way of their corporate profits rolling in. And justice? You've got to be kidding!

"How can any rational individual explain that white elephant conundrum in the middle of our tax system and, indeed, our entire legal system?" the note went on:

Here we have a system that is, by far, too complicated for the brightest of the master scholars to understand. Yet, it mercilessly "holds accountable" its victims, claiming that they're responsible for fully complying with laws not even the experts understand. The law "requires" a signature on the bottom of a tax filing; yet no one can say truthfully that they understand what they are signing; if that's not "duress" then what is. If this is not the measure of a totalitarian regime, nothing is."

This letter is a coherent and lucid expression of views and concerns, many of them legitimate, shared by millions of sane, struggling citizens. All of them feel betrayed, as they should, by both the government and the liberal class.

American workers are not the only workers who have been betrayed by the new global economy. Nor are they alone in their anger, as illustrated by strikes and protests in countries such as Greece and China. Sociologist Ching Kwan Lee's study of Chinese labor, Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt, shows that workers in these regions of China experience bitterness and a sense of betrayal very similar to those expressed by Stack.

Lee writes about workers in the northeast province of Liaoning, which, like the rust belt in states such as Ohio, has been abandoned by the Chinese government for the southeast. Liaoning has "declined into a wasteland of bankruptcy and a hotbed of working-class protest by
its many unemployed workers and pensioners. Unpaid pensions and wages, defaults on medical subsidies, and inadequate collective consumption are the main grievances triggering labor unrest in Liaoning."

In the southern province of Guangdong, China's export-oriented industry is booming. The province in 2000 accounted for forty-two percent of all China's exports, 90 percent of which came from eight cities in the Pearl River Delta. The area attracts many of China's eighty to one hundred million migrant workers. But here Lee found "satanic mills" that run "at such a nerve-racking pace that workers' physical limits and bodily strength are put to the test on a daily basis." Workers can put in fourteen- to sixteen-hour days with no rest day during the month until payday. In these factories it is "normal" to work four hundred hours or more a month, especially for those in the garment industry. Working conditions are in open defiance of official labor laws, which mandate a forty-hour week and a maximum of thirty-six hours of overtime per month as well as a day off each week. But labor laws are rarely enforced in China. Most workers, Lee found, endure unpaid wages, illegal deductions, and substandard wage rates. They are often physically abused at work and do not receive compensation if they are injured on the job. Every year a dozen or more workers die from overwork in the city of Shenzhen alone. In Lee's words, the working conditions "go beyond the Marxist notions of exploitation and alienation." A survey published in 2003 by the official China News Agency, cited in Lee's book, found that three in four migrant workers have trouble collecting their pay. Each year scores of workers threaten to commit suicide, Lee writes, by jumping off high-rises or setting themselves on fire over unpaid wages. "If getting paid for one's labor is a fundamental feature of capitalist employment relations, strictly speaking many Chinese workers are not yet laborers," Lee writes.

Workers in China, according to Lee, feel deeply betrayed by a state that espoused Maoist collectivism rather than liberal democratic principles. But the sense of betrayal, and the expressions of rage and bitterness, by workers in China and the United States are very similar. Workers in China have been used and discarded, in much the same way as workers in other global industrial centers, from Michigan to India to Vietnam to South Korea. There are, Lee estimates, some thirty million "excess workers" in China who are effectively but not officially unemployed. Lee found that many of the workers "broke down in tears in the course of our conversation, while others could barely contain their indignation and anger." She noted that "a sense of being victimized by injustice was widely shared in the local communities."— Lee sees a looming crisis in China that will mirror the crisis in the United States and in other parts of the world where corporations have been permitted to ruthlessly exploit workers and move to new locations once wages begin to rise or workers become organized. The fury Joe Stack expressed against corporate abuse of the working class is a fury that, Lee warns, is reverberating around the globe in a multiplicity of tongues.

India, along with China and other emergent economies, has experienced the same desperation. An estimated 182,936 Indian farmers committed suicide between 1997 and 2007. Nearly two-thirds of these suicides occurred in five of India's twenty-eight states. Those who took their lives, the Indian journalist Palagummi Sainath has written, were primarily farmers who fell deeply in debt.— Debt in Indian peasant households doubled in the first decade of India's neoliberal "economic reforms," from twenty-six percent of farm households to 48.6 percent, Sainath found. The farmers who killed themselves largely grew cash crops for export, such as cotton, coffee, sugarcane, groundnut, pepper, and vanilla. The switch from subsistence farming to cash crops, pushed on farmers by corporations, eventually led to higher cultivation costs, higher loans, and unsustainable debts, leaving farmers at the mercy of global commodity markets. Seed prices, controlled by corporate seed companies such as Monsanto, skyrocketed. And farmers, finally, could not cope. Many simply walked away from their land.
"There's much excited talk these days about a great global shift of power, with speculation about whether, or when, China might displace the U.S. as the dominant global power, along with India, which, if it happened, would mean that the global system would be returning to something like what it was before the European conquests,” said Noam Chomsky, speaking at the Left Forum at Pace University in New York:

And indeed their recent GDP growth has been spectacular. But there's a lot more to say about it. So if you take a look at the U.N. human development index, basic measure of the health of the society, it turns out that India retains its place near the bottom. It's now 134th, slightly above Cambodia, below Laos and Tajikistan. Actually, it's dropped since the reforms began. China ranks ninety-second, a bit above Jordan, below the Dominican Republic and Iran. By comparison, Cuba, which has been under harsh U.S. attack for fifty years, is ranked fifty-second. It's the highest in Central America and the Caribbean, barely below the richest societies in South America. India and China also suffer from extremely high inequality, so well over a billion of their inhabitants fall far lower in the scale. Furthermore, an accurate accounting would go beyond conventional measures to include serious costs that China and India can't ignore for long: ecological, resource depletion, many others.

Front-page speculations about a global shift of power "disregard a crucial factor that's familiar to all of us: nations divorced from the internal distribution of power are not the real actors in international affairs," Chomsky said:

That truism was brought to public attention by that incorrigible radical Adam Smith, who recognized that the principal architects of power in England were the owners of the society—in his day, the merchants and manufacturers—and they made sure that policy would attend scrupulously to their interests, however grievous the impact on the people of England and, of course, much worse, the victims of what he called "the savage injustice of the Europeans" abroad. British crimes in India were the main concern of an old-fashioned conservative with moral values.

Chomsky said that there is indeed a global shift on power, "though not the one that occupies center stage":

It's a shift from the global work force to transnational capital, and it's been sharply escalating during the neoliberal years. The cost is substantial, including the Joe Stacks of the U.S., starving peasants in India, and millions of protesting workers in China, where the labor share in income is declining even more rapidly than in most of the world.

Chomsky is one of the few intellectuals who challenges the structure and inequity of corporate capitalism and our state of permanent war. Perhaps America's greatest intellectual, Chomsky is deeply reviled by the liberal class. His massive body of work, which includes nearly one hundred books, has for decades deflated and exposed the lies of the power elite, the myths they perpetrate, and the complicity of the liberal class. Chomsky has done this despite being largely blacklisted by the commercial media and turned into a pariah by the academy. He combines moral autonomy with rigorous scholarship, a remarkable grasp of detail, and a searing intellect. He curtly dismisses our two-party system as a mirage orchestrated by the corporate state, excoriates the liberal class for being toadies, and describes the drivel of the commercial media as a form of "brainwashing." And as our nation's most prescient critic of unregulated capitalism, globalization, and the poison of empire, he enters his eighty-first year warning us that we have little time left to save our anemic democracy and our ecosystem.
"It is very similar to late Weimar Germany," Chomsky said when I spoke with him. "The parallels are striking. There was also tremendous disillusionment with the parliamentary system. The most striking fact about Weimar was not that the Nazis managed to destroy the Social Democrats and the Communists but that the traditional parties, the Conservative and Liberal Parties, were hated and disappeared. It left a vacuum which the Nazis very cleverly and intelligently managed to take over."

"The United States is extremely lucky that no honest, charismatic figure has arisen," Chomsky went on:

Every charismatic figure is such an obvious crook that he destroys himself, like [Joseph] McCarthy or [Richard] Nixon or the evangelist preachers. If somebody comes along who is charismatic and honest, this country is in real trouble because of the frustration, disillusionment, the justified anger, and the absence of any coherent response. What are people supposed to think if someone says, "I have got an answer, we have an enemy"? There it was the Jews. Here it will be the illegal immigrants and the blacks. We will be told that white males are a persecuted minority. We will be told we have to defend ourselves and the honor of the nation. Military force will be exalted. People will be beaten up. This could become an overwhelming force. And if it happens it will be more dangerous than Germany. The United States is the world power. Germany was powerful but had more powerful antagonists. I don't think all this is very far away. If the polls are accurate it is not the Republicans but the right-wing Republicans, the crazed Republicans, who will sweep the [November 2010] election.

"I have never seen anything like this in my lifetime," Chomsky added.

I am old enough to remember the 1930s. My whole family was unemployed. There were far more desperate conditions than today. But it was hopeful. People had hope. The CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] was organizing. No one wants to say it anymore, but the Communist Party was the spearhead for labor and civil-rights organizing. Even things like giving my unemployed seamstress aunt a week in the country. It was a life. There is nothing like that now. The mood of the country is frightening. The level of anger, frustration, and hatred of institutions is not organized in a constructive way. It is going off into self-destructive fantasies.

"I listen to talk radio," Chomsky said. "I don't want to hear Rush Limbaugh. I want to hear the people calling in. They are like Joe Stack. 'What is happening to me? I have done all the right things. I am a God-fearing Christian. I work hard for my family. I have a gun. I believe in the values of the country, and my life is collapsing.'"

In works such as On Power and Ideology and Manufacturing Consent, Chomsky has, more than any other American intellectual, charted the downward spiral of the American political and economic system. He reminds us that genuine intellectual inquiry is always subversive. It challenges cultural and political assumptions. It critiques structures. It is relentlessly self-critical. It implodes the self-indulgent myths and stereotypes we use to aggrandize ourselves and ignore our complicity in acts of violence and oppression. And genuine inquiry always makes the powerful, as well as their liberal apologists, deeply uncomfortable.

Chomsky reserves his fiercest venom for members of the liberal class who serve as a smoke screen for the cruelty of unchecked capitalism and imperial war. He has consistently exposed their moral and intellectual posturing as a fraud. And this is why Chomsky is hated, and perhaps feared, more among liberals than among the right wing he also excoriates. When Christopher Hitchens decided to become a windup doll for the Bush administration after 9/11, one of the first things he did was write a vicious article attacking Chomsky. Hitchens, unlike most of the right-wing elites he served, knew which intellectual in America mattered.

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"I don't bother writing about Fox News," Chomsky said:

*It is too easy. What I talk about are the liberal intellectuals, the ones who portray themselves and perceive themselves as challenging power, as courageous, as standing up for truth and justice. They are basically the guardians of the faith. They set the limits. They tell us how far we can go. They say, 'Look how courageous I am.' But do not go one millimeter beyond that. At least for the educated sectors, they are the most dangerous in supporting power.*

Because he steps outside of the clichéd demarcations of intellectual left and right, equally eschewing all ideologies, Chomsky has been crucial to American discourse for decades, from his work on the Vietnam War to his criticisms of the Obama administration. He stubbornly maintains his position as an iconoclast, one who distrusts power in any form. And he is one of the few voices that speak to the reality of war, the disastrous effects of imperial power, and the fact that, rather than promoting virtue or waging war based on good intentions, the permanent war economy is consuming and destroying innocent lives at home and abroad.

"Most intellectuals have a self-understanding of themselves as the conscience of humanity," said the Middle East scholar Norman Finkelstein, a former student of Chomsky's:

*They revel in and admire someone like Vaclav Havel. Chomsky is contemptuous of Havel. Chomsky embraces the Julien Benda view of the world. There are two sets of principles. They are the principles of power and privilege and the principles of truth and justice. If you pursue truth and justice, it will always mean a diminution of power and privilege. If you pursue power and privilege it will always be at the expense of truth and justice. Benda says that the credo of any true intellectual has to be, as Christ said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Chomsky exposes the pretenses of those who claim to be the bearers of truth and justice. He shows that in fact these intellectuals are the bearers of power and privilege and all the evil that attends it.*

"I try to encourage people to think for themselves, to question standard assumptions," Chomsky said when asked about his goals:

*Don't take assumptions for granted. Begin by taking a skeptical attitude toward anything that is conventional wisdom. Make it justify itself. It usually can't. Be willing to ask questions about what is taken for granted. Try to think things through for yourself. There is plenty of information. You have got to learn how to judge, evaluate, and compare it with other things. You have to take some things on trust or you can't survive. But if there is something significant and important, don't take it on trust. As soon as you read anything that is anonymous, you should immediately distrust it. If you read in the newspapers that Iran is defying the international community, ask, "Who is the international community?" India is opposed to sanctions. China is opposed to sanctions. Brazil is opposed to sanctions. The Non-Aligned Movement is vigorously opposed to sanctions and has been for years. Who is the international community? It is Washington and anyone who happens to agree with it. You can figure that out, but you have to do work. It is the same on issue after issue.*

Chomsky's courage to speak on behalf of those whose suffering is minimized or ignored in mass culture, such as the Palestinians, is an example for anyone searching for models of the moral life. Perhaps even more than his scholarship, his example of moral independence sustains all those who defy the cant of the crowd, and that of the liberal class, to speak the truth.

The role of the liberal class in defending the purportedly good intentions of the power elite was on public display in 1985, when *Foreign Affairs* published a tenth-anniversary
The liberal class in the magazine, writers such as David Fromkin and James Chace, argued that the military intervention in Vietnam was "predicated on the view that the United States has a duty to look beyond its purely national interests," and that, pursuant to its "global responsibilities," the United States must "serve the interests of mankind." In moral terms, in other words, the intent of the military intervention was good. It was correct to oppose "communist aggression" by the Vietnamese. But the war, these liberals argued, was ultimately wrong because it was impractical, because "our side was likely to lose." The liberal class critiqued the war on practical but not moral grounds. They were countered by the militarists who argued that with more resolve the North Vietnamese could have been defeated on the battlefield.

The virtues of the nation, even in an act of war, are sacrosanct. The liberal class cannot question these virtues and remain within the circles of the power elite.

The same scenario was played out in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. David Remnick, the editor of the New Yorker, and Bill Keller, a columnist for the New York Times and later the paper's executive editor, along with Michael Ignatieff, the former director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard and current head of the Labor Party in Canada, joined Leon Wieseltier, along with academics such as Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago Divinity School, Michael Walzer of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and Anne-Marie Slaughter at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, to become self-described "reluctant hawks." The New Republic's Peter Beinart, joining the calls for war by the liberal class, wrote a book called The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again.

At the start of the war, Slaughter, then dean of the Woodrow Wilson School and president of the American Society of International Law (as of this writing, she is now director of Policy Planning for the U.S. Department of State), wrote in Foreign Affairs that "the world cannot afford to look the other way when faced with the prospect, as in Iraq, of a brutal ruler acquiring nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction":

Addressing this danger requires a different strategy, one that maximizes the chances of early and effective collective action. In this regard, and in comparison to the changes that are taking place in the area of intervention for the purposes of humanitarian protection, the biggest problem with the Bush preemption strategy may be that it does not go far enough.

Ignatieff told the Guardian newspaper at the start of the war:

I still think that Bush is right when he says Iraq would be better off if Saddam were disarmed and, if necessary, replaced by force. Ideology cannot help us here. In the weeks and years ahead, the choices are not about who we are or what company we should keep nor even about what we think America is or should be. They are about what risks are worth running, when our safety depends on the answer, and when the freedom of 25 million people hangs in the balance.

Ignatieff, defending the invasion on National Public Radio's Fresh Air with Terry Gross in March 2003, laid out the classic arguments of the liberal class. He insisted that war was a humanitarian action, that he supported the war with a heavy heart, but that there was no other option. This humanitarian and moral coloring to war, the insistence that the motives of the warmakers is virtuous, is the primary function of the liberal class, the reason the power elite tolerates its existence.

The liberal class played the same function during the war in Vietnam. War becomes a necessary evil. The rhetoric of the liberal class, however, mocks the brutal reality of war. Most
liberals, including Ignatieff, have never been in combat. Their children rarely serve in the military. They neither know nor understand the destructive power of modern weaponry or the propensity on the part of armed combatants, whose fear and paranoia are raised to a fever pitch, to shoot any person, armed or unarmed, or obliterate whole villages in air strikes, if they feel threatened. Ignatieff’s assertion at the time that "the only real chance that Iraq has to become a decent society is through American force of arms" is, when juxtaposed with the reality of industrial warfare, little different from the cruder propaganda disseminated by the Bush White House. He and the liberal class joined the Bush administration in carrying out a project that under international law was illegal and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, far more than had ever been slaughtered by Saddam Hussein, and thousands more Afghani and Pakistani civilians. The wars in the Middle East have also driven several million Iraqis, Pakistanis, and Afghans into squalid displacement and refugee camps. War and violence, as instruments of virtue, are a contradiction in terms. But you can't fully grasp this unless you have been in combat, and combat is something the liberal class has been able to hand off to the working class since World War II.

The solitary voices of dissent that condemned the war at its inception were attacked as fiercely by the liberal class as by the right wing. When documentary filmmaker Michael Moore accepted the Oscar for his film Bowling for Columbine on March 23, 2003, he used the occasion to denounce the war, which had begun a few days earlier, as well as the legitimacy of the Bush presidency.

"We live in a fictitious time," Moore, dressed in an ill-fitting tuxedo, told an increasingly hostile audience:

_We live in a time when we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons, whether it is the fiction of duct tape or Orange Alerts. We are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush! Shame on you!_

Moore was booed and jeered. He told me he skipped the after-parties and spent the night alone in his hotel room, flipping through channels on which commentators, which included liberal pundits such as Al Franken and Keith Olbermann, unleashed vicious denunciations against him. Moore had crossed the parameters drawn by the power elite. Liberals, in denouncing him, fulfilled their political role. They discredited Moore because he did not obey the rules. And they did it with enthusiasm. Moore was portrayed as a "far-left" radical who needed to be escorted off the premises.

"American liberal intellectuals take special pride in their 'toughmindedness,' in their success in casting aside the illusions and myths of the old left, for these same 'tough' new liberals reproduce some of that old left's worst characteristics," Tony Judt wrote in the London Review of Books:

_They may see themselves as having migrated to the opposite shore; but they display precisely the same mixture of dogmatic faith and cultural provincialism, not to mention the exuberant enthusiasm for violent political transformation at other people's expense, that marked their fellow-traveling predecessors across the Cold War ideological divide. The value of such persons to ambitious, radical regimes is an old story. Indeed, intellectual camp followers of this kind were first identified by Lenin himself, who coined the term that still describes them best. Today, America's liberal armchair warriors are the "useful idiots" of the War on Terror._
I TRAVELED TO Washington in May 2010 to join U.S. Representative Dennis Kucinich for a public teach-in on the wars. Kucinich used the Capitol Hill event to denounce the request by Obama for an additional $33 billion for the war in Afghanistan. The Ohio Democrat had introduced House Concurrent Resolution 248, with sixteen co-sponsors, which would have required the House of Representatives to debate whether to continue the Afghanistan war. Kucinich, to his credit, was, along with Ron Paul, one of only two members of the House to publicly condemn the Obama administration's authorization to assassinate Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen and cleric living in Yemen, over alleged links to a failed Christmas airline bombing in Detroit. Kucinich also invited investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill, writer David Swanson, retired army colonel Ann Wright, and Iraq war veteran Josh Stieber.

The gathering, held in the Rayburn Building, was a sober reminder of the insignificance of the left. No other Congress members were present, and only a smattering of young staff members attended. Most of the audience of about seventy were peace activists who, as is usual at such events, were joined by a motley collection of conspiracy theorists who insisted that 9/11 was an inside job, or that Senator Paul Wellstone, who died in a 2002 plane crash, had been assassinated. Scahill provided a litany of statistics that illustrated how corporations have taken over our internal security and intelligence apparatus. They not only run our economy and manage our systems of communication. They not only own the two major political parties. They have built a private military. And they have become unassailable.

Scahill, who has done most of the groundbreaking investigative reporting on the conduct of private contractors in Iraq, including that of the security firm Blackwater (renamed, after a firestorm of bad publicity and public outrage at its methods, Xe), laid out that afternoon how the management of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was steadily transferred by the Pentagon to unaccountable private contractors. He lamented the lack of support in Congress for a bill put forward by Representative Jan Schakowsky of Illinois. House Resolution 4102, known as the Stop Outsourcing Security (SOS) Act, would "responsibly phase out the use of private security contractors for functions that should be reserved for U.S. military forces and government personnel."

"It is one of the sober realities of the time we are living in that you can put forward a bill that says something as simple as 'we should not outsource national security functions to private contractors' and you only get twenty members of Congress to support the bill," Scahill said:

_The unfortunate reality is that Representative Schakowsky knows that the war industry is bipartisan. They give on both sides. For a while there, it seemed contractor was the new Israel You could not find a member of Congress to speak out against them because so many members of Congress are beholden to corporate funding to keep their House or Senate seats. I also think Obama's election has wiped that out, as it has with many things, because the White House will dispatch emissaries to read the riot act to members of Congress who don't toe the party line._

The privatization of government functions has at once empowered corporate dominance and weakened the traditional role of government. There are eighteen military and civilian intelligence agencies, and seventy percent of their combined budgets is outsourced to corporations, who use the experience and expertise gained on these projects to provide similar services to other corporations, as well as foreign governments. The Pentagon has privatized sixty-nine percent of its workforce. Scahill pointed out the overwhelming privatization of the Afghanistan war effort. As of this writing, there are 104,000 Department of Defense contractors and sixty-eight thousand troops, almost 1.5 corporate employees for every member of the military.
The State Department in Afghanistan has hired an additional fourteen thousand private contractors.

"Within a matter of months, and certainly within a year, the United States will have upwards of 220,000 to 250,000 U.S. government-funded personnel occupying Afghanistan, a far cry from the 70,000 U.S. soldiers that those Americans who pay attention understand the United States has in Afghanistan," Scahill said. "This is a country where the president's national security adviser, General James Jones, said there are less than one hundred al-Qaida operatives who have no ability to strike at the United States. That was the stated rationale and reasoning for being in Afghanistan. It was to hunt down those responsible for 9/11."

Josh Stieber spoke at the end of the event. Stieber was deployed with the army to Iraq from February 2007 to April 2008. He was in Bravo Company 2-16 Infantry, which was involved in the July 2007 Apache helicopter attack on Iraqi civilians depicted on a controversial video released in April 2010 by WikiLeaks, an organization that publishes anonymous submissions of and commentary on sensitive government and corporate documents. Stieber, who left the army as a conscientious objector, has issued a public apology to the Iraqi people.

"This was not by any means the exception," he said of the video, which showed helicopter pilots nonchalantly gunning down civilians, including a Reuters photographer and children, in a Baghdad street:

*It is inevitable given the situation we were going through. We were going through a lot of combat at the time. A roadside bomb would go off or a sniper would fire a shot, and you had no idea where it was coming from. There was a constant paranoia, a constant being on edge. If you put people in a situation like that where there are plenty of civilians, that kind of thing was going to happen and did happen and will continue to happen as long as our nation does not challenge these things. Now that this video has become public, it is our responsibility as a people and a country to recognize that this is what war looks like on a day-to-day basis."

The voices of sanity, the voices of reason, of those who have a moral core, those like Kucinich or Scahill or Stieber, have little chance now to be heard. The liberal class, which failed to grasp the dark intentions of the corporate state and its servants in the Democratic Party, bears some responsibility.

Support for war has allied the liberals with venal warlords in Afghanistan who are as opposed to the rights of women and basic democratic freedoms, and as heavily involved in opium trafficking, as the Taliban. The supposed moral lines between the liberal class and our adversaries are fictional. The uplifting narratives used to justify the war in Afghanistan are pathetic attempts by the liberal class to redeem acts of senseless brutality. War cannot be waged to instill any virtue, including democracy or the liberation of women. War always empowers those who have a penchant for violence and access to weapons. War turns the moral order upside down and abolishes all discussions of human rights. War banishes the just and the decent to the margins of society. The power of modern weapons means inevitable civilian deaths or "collateral damage." An aerial drone is our version of an improvised explosive device. An iron fragmentation bomb is our answer to a suicide bomb. A burst from a belt-fed light machine gun causes the same terror and bloodshed among civilians no matter who pulls the trigger.

"We need to tear the mask off of the fundamentalist warlords who after the tragedy of 9/11 replaced the Taliban," Malalai Joya, who was expelled from the Afghan parliament for denouncing government corruption and the Western occupation, told me:
They used the mask of democracy to take power. They continue this deception. These warlords are mentally the same as the Taliban. The only change is physical. These warlords during the civil war in Afghanistan from 1992 to 1996 killed sixty-five thousand innocent people. They have committed human rights violations, like the Taliban, against women and many others.

"We believe that this is not war on terror," she said:

This is war on innocent civilians. Look at the massacres carried out by NATO forces in Afghanistan. Look what they did in May in the Farah Province, where more than 150 civilians were killed, most of them women and children. They used white phosphorus and cluster bombs. There were two hundred civilians on ninth of September killed in the Kunduz Province, again most of them women and children. The United States and NATO eight years ago occupied my country under the banner of woman's rights and democracy. But they have only pushed us from the frying pan into the fire. They put into power men who are photocopies of the Taliban.

Over the past ten years of occupation, Afghanistan's boom in the opium trade, used to produce heroin, has funneled hundreds of millions of dollars to the Taliban, al-Qaida, local warlords, criminal gangs, kidnappers, private armies, drug traffickers, and many of the senior figures in the government of President Hamid Karzai. The New York Times reported that Ahmed Wali Karzai, brother of President Karzai, was collecting money from the CIA although he is a major player in the illegal opium business. Afghanistan produces ninety-two percent of the world's opium in a trade worth some $65 billion, the United Nations estimates. This opium feeds some fifteen million addicts worldwide and kills around one hundred thousand people annually. These fatalities should be added to the lists of war dead.

Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), has said that the drug trade has permitted the Taliban to thrive and expand despite the presence of NATO troops: "The Taliban's direct involvement in the opium trade allows them to fund a war machine that is becoming technologically more complex and increasingly widespread."

The UNODC estimates the Taliban earned $90 million to $160 million a year from taxing the production and smuggling of opium and heroin between 2005 and 2009, as much as double the amount it earned annually while it was in power nearly a decade ago. And Costa described the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as "the world's largest free-trade zone in anything and everything that is illicit," an area blighted by drugs, weapons, and illegal immigration. The "perfect storm of drugs and terrorism" may be on the move along drug trafficking routes through Central Asia, he warned. Opium profits are being pumped into militant groups in Central Asia, and "a big part of the region could be engulfed in large-scale terrorism, endangering its massive energy resources."

"Afghanistan, after eight years of occupation, has become a world center for drugs," Joya told me:

The drug lords are the only ones with power. How can you expect these people to stop the planting of opium and halt the drug trade? How is it that the Taliban, when they were in power, destroyed the opium production, and a superpower not only cannot destroy the opium production but allows it to increase? And while all this goes on, those who support the war talk to you about women's rights. We do not have human rights now in most provinces. It is as easy to kill a woman in my country as it is to kill a bird. In some big cities like Kabul, some women have access to jobs and education, but in most of the country the situation for women is hell. Rape, kidnapping, and
domestic violence are increasing. These fundamentalists during the so-called free elections made a misogynist law against Shia women in Afghanistan. This law has even been signed by Hamid Karzai. All these crimes are happening under the name of democracy.

Thousands of Afghan civilians have died from insurgent and foreign military violence. And American and NATO forces are responsible for almost half the civilian deaths in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians have also died from displacement, starvation, disease, exposure, lack of medical treatment, crime, and lawlessness resulting from the war.

Joya said that NATO, by choosing sides in a battle between two corrupt and brutal opponents, has lost all legitimacy in the country, an opinion echoed by a high-level U.S. diplomat in Afghanistan, Matthew Hoh, who resigned in protest over the war. Hoh wrote in his resignation letter that Karzai's government is filled with "glaring corruption and unabashed graft." Karzai, he wrote, is a president "whose confidants and chief advisers comprise drug lords and war crimes villains who mock our own rule of law and counter-narcotics effort."

Joya was skeptical about the fate of the touted billions in international aid to Afghanistan:

"Many Afghans side with the Taliban," Joya said.

They do not support the Taliban, but they are fed up with these warlords and this injustice, and they go with the Taliban to take revenge. I do not agree with them, but I understand them. Most of my people are against the Taliban and the warlords, which is why millions did not take part in this tragic drama of an election.

Joya, who changes houses in Kabul frequently because of death threats, decried the support for the Karzai administration:

The U.S. wastes taxpayers’ money and the blood of their soldiers by supporting such a Mafia-corrupt system of Hamid Karzai. They chained my country to the center of drugs. If Obama was really honest he would support the democratic-minded people of my country. We have a lot of those people. But he does not support the democratic-minded people of my country. He is going to start war in Pakistan by attacking in the border area of Pakistan. More civilians have been killed in the Obama period than even during the criminal Bush.

"My people are sandwiched between two powerful enemies," she lamented:

The occupation forces from the sky bomb and kill innocent civilians. On the ground, Taliban and these warlords deliver fascism. As ATO kills more civilians, the resistance to the foreign troops increases. If the U.S. government and NATO do not leave voluntarily, my people will give to them the same lesson they gave to Russia and to the English who three times tried to occupy Afghanistan. It is easier for us to fight against one enemy rather than two.
Success in Afghanistan depends on the ability to create an indigenous army that will battle the Taliban, provide security and stability for Afghan civilians, and remain loyal to the puppet Karzai government. A similar task eluded the Red Army, although the Soviets spent a decade attempting to pacify the country. It eluded the British a century earlier. And the United States, too, will fail.

U.S. military advisers who work with the Afghan National Army, or ANA, speak of poorly trained and unmotivated Afghan soldiers with little stomach for military discipline and even less for fighting. The advisers describe many ANA units as filled with brigands who terrorize local populations, engaging in extortion, intimidation, rape, theft, and open collusion with the Taliban. They contend that the ANA is riddled with Taliban sympathizers. And when U.S. and ANA soldiers fight together against Taliban insurgents, the U.S. advisers say the ANA soldiers prove to be fickle and unreliable combatants.

Military commanders in Afghanistan, rather than pump out statistics about enemy body counts, measure progress by the size of the ANA. The bigger the ANA, the better we are supposedly doing. The pressure on trainers to increase ANA numbers means that training and vetting of incoming Afghan recruits are nearly nonexistent.

The process of induction for Afghan soldiers begins at the Kabul Military Training Center. American instructors routinely complain of shortages of school supplies such as whiteboards, markers, and paper. They often have to go to markets and pay for these supplies on their own or do without. Instructors are pressured to pass all recruits, and they graduate many who have been absent for a third to half the training time. Most are inducted into the ANA without having mastered rudimentary military skills.

"I served the first half of my tour at the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC), where I was part of a small team working closely with the ANA to set up the country's first officer basic course for newly commissioned Afghan lieutenants," a U.S. Army first lieutenant told me. He asked not to be identified by name. "During the second half of my tour, I left Kabul's military schoolhouse and was reassigned to an embedded tactical training team, or ETT team, to help stand up a new Afghan logistics battalion in Herat.

"Afghan soldiers leave the KMTC grossly unqualified," said this lieutenant, who remains on active duty. "American mentors do what they can to try and fix these problems, but their efforts are blocked by pressure from higher, both in Afghan and American chains of command, to pump out as many soldiers as fast as possible."

Afghan soldiers are sent from the KMTC directly to active-duty ANA units. The units always have American trainers, known as a "mentoring team," attached to them. The rapid increase in ANA soldiers has outstripped the ability of the American military to provide trained mentoring teams. The teams, normally composed of members of the Army Special Forces, are now formed by groups of American soldiers, plucked more or less at random, from units all over Afghanistan.

"This is how my entire team was selected during the middle of my tour: a random group of people from all over Kabul—air force, navy, army, active-duty, and national guard—pulled from their previous assignments, thrown together and expected to do a job that none of us were trained in any meaningful way to do," the officer said:
We are expected, by virtue of time in grade, and membership in the U.S. military, to be able to train a foreign force in military operations, an extremely irresponsible policy that is ethnocentric at its core and which assumes some sort of natural superiority in which an untrained American soldier has everything to teach the Afghans, but nothing to learn.

"You're lucky enough if you had any mentorship training at all, something the army provides in a limited capacity at premobilization training at Fort Riley, [Kansas], but having none is the norm," he said. "Soldiers who receive their premobilization training at Fort Bragg [North Carolina] learn absolutely nothing about mentoring foreign forces aside from being given a booklet on the subject, and yet soldiers who go through Bragg before being shipped to Afghanistan are just as likely to be assigned to mentoring teams as anyone else."

The differences between the Afghan military structure and the U.S. military structure are substantial. The ANA handles logistics differently. Its rank structure is not the same. Its administration uses different military terms. It rarely works with the aid of computers or basic technology. The cultural divide leaves most trainers, who do not speak Dari, struggling to figure out how things work in the ANA.

"The majority of my time spent as a mentor involved trying to understand what the Afghans were doing and how they were expected to do it, and only then could I even begin to advise anyone on the problems they were facing," this officer said. "In other words, American military advisers aren't immediately helpful to Afghans. There is a major learning curve involved that is sometimes never overcome. Some advisers play a pivotal role, but many have little or no effect as mentors."

The real purpose of American advisers assigned to ANA units, however, is not ultimately to train Afghans but rather to function as liaisons between Afghani units and American firepower and logistics. The ANA is unable to integrate ground units with artillery and air support. It has no functioning supply system. It depends on the U.S. military to do basic tasks. The United States even pays the bulk of ANA salaries.

"In the unit I was helping to mentor, orders for mission-essential equipment, such as five-ton trucks, went unfilled for months, and winter clothes came late due to national shortages," the officer told me. "Many soldiers in the unit had to make do for the first few weeks of Afghanistan's winter without jackets or other cold-weather items."

But what disturbs advisers most is the widespread corruption within the ANA, which has enraged and alienated local Afghans and proved a potent recruiting tool for the Taliban.

"In the Afghan logistics battalion I was embedded with, the commander himself was extorting a local shopkeeper, and his staff routinely stole from the local store," the adviser said:

In Kabul, on one humanitarian aid mission I was on, we handed out school supplies to children, and in an attempt to lend validity to the ANA we had them [ANA members] distribute the supplies. As it turns out, we received intelligence reports that that very same group of ANA had been extorting money from the villagers under threat of violence. In essence, we teamed up with well-known criminals and local thugs to distribute aid in the very village they had been terrorizing, and that was the face of American charity.

We currently spend some $4 billion a month on Afghanistan. But we are unable to pay for whiteboards and markers for instructors. Afghan soldiers lack winter jackets. Kabul is still in
ruins. Unemployment is estimated at about forty percent. And Afghanistan is one of the most food-insecure countries on the planet.

What are we doing? Where is this money going?

Look to the civilian contractors. These contractors dominate the lucrative jobs in Afghanistan. The American military, along with the ANA, is considered a poor relation. And war, after all, is primarily a business.

"When I arrived in the theater, one of the things I was shocked to see was how many civilians were there," the U.S. officer said:

Americans and foreign nationals from Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia were holding jobs in great numbers in Kabul. There are a ton of corporations in Afghanistan performing labor that was once exclusively in the realm of the military. If you're a [military] cook, someone from Kellogg Brown & Root now KBR has taken your spot. If you're a logistician or military adviser, someone from MPRI, Military Professional Resources Inc., will probably take over your job soon. If you're a technician or a mechanic, there are civilians from Harris Corp [oration] and other companies there who are taking over more and more of your responsibilities.

This officer deployed to Afghanistan with about one hundred military advisers and mentors, he says. But when they arrived, they encountered an unpleasant surprise:

[N] early half our unit had to be reassigned because their jobs had been taken over by civilians from MPRI. It seems that even in a war zone, soldiers are at risk of losing their jobs to outsourcing. And if you're a reservist, the situation is even more unfortunate. You are torn from your life to serve a yearlong tour of duty away from your civilian job, your friends, and family, only to end up in Afghanistan with nothing to do because your military duty was passed on to a civilian contractor. Eventually you are thrown onto a mentoring team somewhere, or some [other] responsibility is created for you. It becomes evident that the corporate presence in Afghanistan has a direct effect on combat operations.

What was once done by the military, concerned with tactical and strategic advancement, is now done by war profiteers, concerned solely with profit. The aims of the military and the contractors are in conflict. Any scaling down of the war or withdrawal means a loss of business for corporations. But expansion of the war, as many veterans will attest, is making the situation only more precarious.

"American and Afghan soldiers are putting their lives at risk, Afghan civilians are dying, and yet there's this underlying system in place that gains more from keeping all of them in harm's way rather than taking them out of it," the officer complained. "If we bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, we may profit morally, we might make gains for humanity, but moral profits and human gains do not contribute to the bottom line. Peace and profit are ultimately contradictory forces at work in Afghanistan."

We hear of the wells dug, the schools built, the roads paved and the food distributed in Afghan villages by the occupation forces—and almost nothing about the huge profits made by contractors. It is estimated that only ten percent of the money poured into Afghanistan is used to ameliorate the suffering of Afghan civilians. The remainder is swallowed by contractors who siphon the money out of Afghanistan and into foreign bank accounts. This misguided allocation of funds is compounded in Afghanistan because the highest-paying jobs for Afghans go to those
who can act as interpreters for the American military and foreign contractors. The best-educated Afghans are enticed away from Afghan institutions that desperately need their skills and education.

"It is this system that has broken the logistics of Afghanistan," the officer said:

*It is this system of waste and private profit from public funds that keeps Kabul in ruins. It is this system that manages to feed Westerners all across the country steak and lobster once a week while an estimated 8.4 million Afghans—the entire population of New York City, the Five Boroughs—suffer from chronic food insecurity and starvation every day. When you go to Bagram Air Base, or Camp Phoenix, or Camp Eggers, it's clear to see that the problem does not lie in getting supplies into the country. The question becomes who gets them. And we wonder why there's an insurgency.*

The problem in Afghanistan is not ultimately a military problem. It is a political and social problem. The real threat to stability in Afghanistan is not the Taliban, but widespread hunger and food shortages, crippling poverty, rape, corruption, and a staggering rate of unemployment that mounts as foreign companies take jobs away from the local workers and businesses. The corruption and abuse by the Karzai government and the ANA, along with the presence of foreign contractors, are the central impediments to peace. The more we empower these forces, the worse the war will become. The plan to escalate the number of U.S. soldiers and Marines, and to swell the ranks of the Afghan National Army, will not defeat or pacify the Taliban.

"What good are a quarter-million well-trained Afghan troops to a nation slipping into famine?" the officer asked. "What purpose does a strong military serve with a corrupt and inept government in place? What hope do we have for peace if the best jobs for the Afghans involve working for the military? What is the point of getting rid of the Taliban if it means killing civilians with airstrikes and supporting a government of misogynist warlords and criminals?"

"We as Americans do not help the Afghans by sending in more troops, by increasing military spending, by adding chaos to disorder," he said. "What little help we do provide is only useful in the short term and is clearly unsustainable in the face of our own economic crisis. In the end, no one benefits from this war, not America, not Afghans. Only the CEOs and executive officers of war-profiteering corporations find satisfactory returns on their investments."

CONGRESS HAS APPROVED $345 billion for the war in Afghanistan, which includes more than $40 billion for training and equipping the army and police, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The United States spends an estimated $500,000 to $1 million per soldier or marine per year in Afghanistan, depending on whether expenditures on housing and equipment are included along with pay, food, and fuel. These funds do not include medical costs and veterans' compensation. Foreign aid to Afghanistan, including food and development assistance, has totaled $17 billion since 2002, according to State Department and Congressional Research Service documents.

But it is not the financial cost of the war that makes the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan so tragic, wasteful, and immoral. War as an instrument of change is brutal, savage, impersonal and counterproductive. It mocks the fantasy of individual heroism and the absurdity of Utopian goals, such as the imposition of Western-style democracy or the liberation of women. In an instant, industrial warfare can kill dozens, even hundreds of people, who never see their attackers. The power of industrial weapons is indiscriminate and staggering. They can take down
apartment blocks in seconds, burying and crushing everyone inside. They can demolish villages and send tanks, planes, and ships up in fiery blasts. The wounds, for those who survive, result in terrible burns, blindness, amputation, and lifelong pain and trauma. No one returns the same from such warfare. And once these weapons are employed, all talk of human rights is a farce. The explosive blasts of these weapons systems, for those of us who have witnessed them at work, inevitably kill and maim civilians, including children.

In Peter van Agtmael's *2nd Tour, Hope I Don't Die* and Lori Grinker's *Afterwar: Veterans from a World in Conflict*, two haunting books of war photographs, we see pictures of war which are almost always hidden from public view. They are shadows, for only those who go to and suffer from war can fully confront the visceral horror of it, but the books are at least an attempt to unmask war's savagery.

"Over ninety percent of this soldier's body was burned when a roadside bomb hit his vehicle, igniting the fuel tank and burning two other soldiers to death," reads a caption in van Agtmael's book. The photograph shows the bloodied body of a soldier in an operating room:

*His camouflage uniform dangled over the bed, ripped open by the medics who had treated him on the helicopter. Clumps of his skin had peeled away, and what was left of it was translucent. He was in and out of consciousness, his eyes stabbing open for a few seconds. As he was lifted from the stretcher to the ER bed, he screamed "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," then "Put me to sleep, please put me to sleep." There was another photographer in the ER, and he leaned his camera over the heads of the medical staff to get an overhead shot. The soldier yelled, "Get that fucking camera out of my face."

"Those were his last words. I visited his grave one winter afternoon six months later," van Agtmael writes, "and the scene of his death is never far from my thoughts."

"There were three of us inside, and the jeep caught fire," Israeli soldier Yossi Arditi says in Grinker's book. He is describing the moment a Molotov cocktail exploded in his vehicle. "The fuel tank was full and it was about to explode, my skin was hanging from my arms and face—but I didn't lose my head. I knew nobody could get inside to help me, that my only way out was through the fire to the doors. I wanted to take my gun, but I couldn't touch it because my hands were burning."

Arditi spent six months in the hospital. He had surgery every two or three months, about twenty operations, over the next three years.

"People who see me, see what war really does," he says.

Filmic and most photographic images of war are shorn of the heart-pounding fear, awful stench, deafening noise, screams of pain, and exhaustion of the battlefield. Such images turn confusion and chaos, the chief elements of combat, into an artful war narrative. They turn war into porn. Soldiers and Marines, especially those who have never seen war, buy cases of beer and watch movies like *Platoon*, movies meant to denounce war, and as they do, they revel in the destructive power of weaponry. The reality of violence is different. Everything formed by violence is senseless and useless. It exists without a future. It leaves behind nothing but death, grief, and destruction.

Chronicles of war that eschew images and scenes of combat begin to capture war's reality. War's effects are what the state and the media, the handmaidens of the war-makers, work hard to
keep hidden. If we really saw war, what war does to young minds and bodies, it would be impossible to embrace the myth of war. If we had to stand over the mangled corpses of school children killed in Afghanistan and listen to the wails of their parents, we would not be able to repeat clichés we use to justify war. This is why war is carefully sanitized. This is why we are given war's perverse and dark thrill but are spared from seeing war's consequences. The mythic visions of war keep it heroic and entertaining. And the media are as guilty as Hollywood. During the start of the Iraq war, television reports gave us the visceral thrill of force and hid from us the effects of bullets, tank rounds, iron fragmentation bombs, and artillery rounds. We tasted a bit of war's exhilaration, but were protected from seeing what war actually does to human bodies.

The wounded, the crippled, and the dead are, in this great charade, swiftly carted offstage. They are war's refuse. We do not see them. We do not hear them. They are doomed, like wandering spirits, to float around the edges of our consciousness, ignored, even reviled. The message they tell is too painful for us to hear. We prefer to celebrate ourselves and our nation by imbibing the myths of glory, honor, patriotism, and heroism, words that in combat become empty and meaningless. And those whom fate has decreed must face war's effects often turn and flee.

Saul Alfaro, who lost his legs in the war in El Salvador, speaks in Grinker's book about the first and final visit from his girlfriend as he lay in an army hospital bed.

"She had been my girlfriend in the military, and we had planned to be married," he says. "But when she saw me in the hospital—I don't know exactly what happened, but later they told me when she saw me she began to cry. Afterwards, she ran away and never came back.

Public manifestations of gratitude are reserved for veterans who dutifully read from the script handed to them by the state. The veterans trotted out for viewing are those who are compliant and palatable, those we can stand to look at without horror, those willing to go along with the lie that war is the highest form of patriotism. "Thank you for your service," we are supposed to say. These soldiers are used to perpetuate the myth. We are used to honor it.

Gary Zuspann, who lives in a special enclosed environment in his parents' home in Waco, Texas, suffers from Gulf War syndrome. He speaks in Grinker's book of feeling like "a prisoner of war" even after the war had ended.

"Basically they put me on the curb and said, okay, fend for yourself," he says in the book. "I was living in a fantasy world where I thought our government cared about us and they take care of their own. I believed it was in my contract, that if you're maimed or wounded during your service in war, you should be taken care of. Now I'm angry."

I went back to Sarajevo after covering the 1990s war for the New York Times and found hundreds of cripples trapped in rooms in apartment blocks with no elevators and no wheelchairs. Most were young men, many without limbs, being cared for by their elderly parents, the glorious war heroes left to rot.

Despair and suicide grip survivors. It is estimated that as many Vietnam veterans committed suicide after the war as were killed during it. The inhuman qualities drilled into soldiers and Marines in wartime defeat them in peacetime. This is what Homer taught us in The Iliad, the great book on war, and The Odyssey, the great book on the long journey to recovery by professional killers. Many never readjust. They cannot connect again with wives, children, parents, or friends, retreating into personal hells of self-destructive anguish and rage.
"They program you to have no emotion—like if somebody sitting next to you gets killed you just have to carry on doing your job and shut up," Steve Annabell, a British veteran of the Falklands War, says to Grinker. "When you leave the service, when you come back from a situation like that, there's no button they can press to switch your emotions back on. So you walk around like a zombie. They don't deprogram you. If you become a problem they just sweep you under the carpet."

"To get you to join up they do all these advertisements—they show people skiing down mountains and doing great things—but they don't show you getting shot at and people with their legs blown off or burning to death," he says. "They don't show you what really happens. It's just bullshit. And they never prepare you for it. They can give you all the training in the world, but it's never the same as the real thing.

Those with whom veterans have most in common when the war is over are often those they fought.

"Nobody comes back from war the same," says Horacio Javier Benitez, who fought the British in the Falklands and is quoted in Grinker's book. "The person, Horacio, who was sent to war, doesn't exist anymore. It's hard to be enthusiastic about normal life; too much seems inconsequential. You contend with craziness and depression.

"Many who served in the Malvinas," he says, using the Argentine name of the islands, "committed suicide, many of my friends.

"I miss my family," reads graffiti captured in one of van Agtmael's photographs. "Please God forgive the lives I took and let my family be happy if I don't go home again."

Next to the plea someone had drawn an arrow toward the words and written in thick, black marker: "Fag!!"

The disparity between what we are told or what we believe about war and war itself is so vast that those who come back are often rendered speechless. What do you say to those who advocate war as an instrument to liberate the women of Afghanistan or bring democracy to Iraq? How do you tell them what war is like? How do you explain that the very proposition of war as an instrument of virtue is absurd? How do you cope with memories of small, terrified children bleeding to death with bits of iron fragments peppered throughout their small bodies? How do you speak of war without tears?

Look beyond the nationalist cant used to justify war. Look beyond the seduction of the weapons and the pornography of violence. Look beyond Obama's ridiculous rhetoric about finishing the job or fighting terror. Focus on the evil of war. War begins by calling for the annihilation of the Other, but ends ultimately in self-annihilation. It corrupts souls and mutilates bodies. It destroys homes and villages and murders children on their way to school. It grinds into the dirt all that is tender and beautiful and sacred. It empowers human deformities—warlords, Shiite death squads, Sunni insurgents, the Taliban, al-Qaida and our own killers—who can speak only in the despicable language of force. War is a scourge. It is a plague. It is industrial murder. And before you support war, especially the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, look into the hollow eyes of the men, women and children who know it.