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A Country Addicted To War

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by Andrew Bacevich

What makes a Harvey Weinstein moment? The now-disgraced Hollywood mogul is hardly the first powerful man to stand accused of having abused women. The Harveys who preceded Harvey himself are legion, their prominence matching or exceeding his own and the misdeeds with which they were charged at least as reprehensible.

In the relatively recent past, a roster of prominent offenders would include Bill Clinton, Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, and, of course, Donald Trump. Throw in various jocks, maestros, senior military officers, members of the professoriate and you end up with quite a list. Yet in virtually all such cases, the alleged transgressions were treated as instances of individual misconduct, egregious perhaps but possessing at best transitory political resonance.

All that, though, was pre-Harvey. As far as male sexual hijinks are concerned, we might compare Weinstein's epic fall from grace to the stock market crash of 1929: one week it's the anything-goes Roaring Twenties, the next we're smack dab in a Great Depression.

How profound is the change? Up here in Massachusetts where I live, we've spent the past year marking John F. Kennedy's 100th birthday. If Kennedy were still around to join in the festivities, it would be as a Class A sex offender. Rarely in American history has the cultural landscape shifted so quickly or so radically.

In our post-Harvey world, men charged with sexual misconduct are guilty until proven innocent, all crimes are capital offenses, and there exists no statute of limitations. Once a largely empty corporate slogan, "zero tolerance" has become a battle cry.

All of this serves as a reminder that, on some matters at least, the American people retain an admirable capacity for outrage. We *can* distinguish between the tolerable and the intolerable. And we *can* demand accountability of powerful individuals and institutions.

Everything They Need to Win (Again!)

What's puzzling is why that capacity for outrage and demand for accountability doesn't extend to our now well-established penchant for waging war across much of the planet.

war/)

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In no way would I wish to minimize the pain, suffering, and humiliation of the women preyed upon by the various reprobates now getting their belated comeuppance. But to judge from published accounts, the women (and in some cases, men) abused by Weinstein, Louis C.K., Mark Halperin, Leon Wieseltier, Kevin Spacey, Al Franken, Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer, Garrison Keillor, my West Point classmate Judge Roy Moore, and their *compadres* at least managed to survive their encounters. None of the perpetrators are charged with having committed murder. No one died.

Compare their culpability to that of the high-ranking officials who have presided over or promoted this country's various military misadventures of the present century. Those wars have, of course, resulted in hundreds of thousands (<http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures>) of deaths and will ultimately cost American taxpayers many trillions (http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2017/Costs%20of%20U.S.%20Post-9_11%20NC%20Crawford%20FINAL%20.pdf) of dollars. Nor have those costly military efforts eliminated "terrorism," as President George W. Bush promised back when today's G.I.s were still in diapers.

Bush told us that, through war, the United States would spread freedom and democracy. Instead, our wars have sown disorder and instability, creating failing or failed states across the Greater Middle East and Africa. In their wake have sprung up ever more, not fewer, jihadist groups, while acts of terror (<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272241.htm>) are soaring globally. These are indisputable facts.

It discomfits me to reiterate this mournful litany of truths. I feel a bit like the doctor telling the lifelong smoker with stage-four lung cancer that an addiction to cigarettes is adversely affecting his health. His mute response: I know and I don't care. Nothing the doc says is going to budge the smoker from his habit. You go through the motions, but wonder why.

In a similar fashion, war has become a habit to which the United States is addicted. Except for the terminally distracted, most of us know that. We also know — *we cannot not know* — that, in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. forces have been unable to accomplish their assigned mission, despite more than 16 years of fighting in the former and more than a decade in the latter.

It's not exactly a good news story, to put it mildly. So forgive me for saying it (yet again (http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176335/tomgram%3A_andrew_bacevich%2C_how_we_learned_not_to_care_about_america%27s_wars/)), but most of us simply don't care, which means that we continue to allow a free hand to those who preside over those wars, while treating with respect the views of pundits and media personalities who persist in promoting them. What's past doesn't count; we prefer to sustain the pretense that tomorrow is pregnant with possibilities. Victory lies just around the corner.

By way of example, consider a recent article (<https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-11-27/victory-or-failure-in-afghanistan-2018-will-be-the-deciding-year>) in *U.S. News and World Report*. The headline: "Victory or Failure in Afghanistan: 2018 Will Be the Deciding Year." The title suggests a balance absent from the text that follows, which reads like a Pentagon press release. Here in its entirety is the nut graf (my own emphasis added):

"Armed with a *new strategy* and renewed support from old allies, the Trump administration now believes it has *everything it needs to win* the war in Afghanistan. Top military advisers all the way up to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis say they can accomplish what two previous administrations and multiple troop surges could not: the *defeat of the*

Taliban by Western-backed local forces, a negotiated peace and the establishment of a popularly supported government in Kabul capable of keeping the country from once again becoming a haven to any terrorist group.”

Now if you buy this, you’ll believe that Harvey Weinstein has learned his lesson and can be trusted to interview young actresses while wearing his bathrobe.

For starters, there is no “new strategy.” Trump’s generals, apparently with a nod from their putative boss, are merely modifying the old “strategy,” which was itself an outgrowth of previous strategies tried, found wanting, and eventually discarded before being rebranded and eventually recycled.

Short of using nuclear weapons, U.S. forces fighting in Afghanistan over the past decade and a half have experimented with just about every approach imaginable: invasion, regime change, occupation, nation-building, pacification, decapitation, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency, not to mention various surges

(http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175176/tomgram:__state_of_surge_afghanistan/), differing in scope and duration. We have had a big troop presence and a smaller one, more bombing and less, restrictive rules of engagement and permissive ones. In the military equivalent of throwing in the kitchen sink, a U.S. Special Operations Command four-engine prop plane recently deposited the largest non-nuclear weapon in the American arsenal on a cave complex in eastern Afghanistan. Although that MOAB (<http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/14/asia/afghanistan-isis-moab-bomb/index.html>) made a big boom, no offer of enemy surrender materialized.

In truth, U.S. commanders have quietly shelved any expectations of achieving an actual victory — traditionally defined as “imposing your will on the enemy” — in favor of a more modest conception of success. In year XVII of America’s Afghanistan War, the hope is that training, equipping, advising, and motivating Afghans to assume responsibility for defending their country may someday allow American forces and their coalition partners to depart. By 2015, that project, building up the Afghan security forces, had already absorbed at least \$65 billion (<http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2015/05/13/65-Billion-Effort-Train-Afghan-Army-Failing>) in U.S. taxpayer dollars. And under the circumstances, consider that a mere down payment.

According to (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/top-u-s-commander-in-afghanistan-says-effort-is-still-in-a-stalemate/>) General John Nicholson, our 17th (<https://www.npr.org/2016/01/28/464744453/next-afghan-war-commander-to-re-evaluate-u-s-response>) commander in Kabul since 2001, the efforts devised and implemented by his many predecessors have resulted in a “stalemate” — a generous interpretation given that the Taliban presently controls more territory (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/trump-afghanistan-war-taliban.html>) than it has held since the U.S. invasion. Officers no less capable than Nicholson himself, David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal among them, didn’t get it done. Nicholson’s argument: trust me.

In essence, the “new strategy” devised by Trump’s generals, Secretary of Defense Mattis and Nicholson among them, amounts to this: persist a tad longer with a tad more. A modest uptick in the number of U.S. and allied troops on the ground (<https://www.npr.org/2017/11/28/567057906/more-u-s-troops-will-accompany-afghan-forces-to-fight-taliban>) will provide more trainers, advisers, and motivators to work with and accompany their Afghan counterparts in the field. The Mattis/Nicholson plan also envisions an increasing (<http://thehill.com/policy/defense/354586-afghanistan-airstrikes-increase-after-new-trump-strategy>) number of air strikes, signaled by the recent use of B-52s to attack illicit Taliban “drug labs” (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/11/20/the-u-s-begins->

bombing-taliban-drug-labs-as-trumps-afghanistan-strategy-takes-hold/?

utm_term=.faa553a4ed02),” a scenario that Stanley Kubrick himself would have been hard-pressed to imagine.

Notwithstanding the novelty of using strategic bombers to destroy mud huts, there’s not a lot new here. Dating back to 2001, coalition forces have already dropped tens of thousands of bombs in Afghanistan. Almost as soon as the Taliban were ousted from Kabul, coalition efforts to create effective Afghan security forces commenced. So, too, did attempts to reduce the production of the opium that has funded the Taliban insurgency, alas with essentially no effect whatsoever

(http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176350/tomgram%3A_alfred_w._mccoy%2C_washington%27s_drug_of_choice_in_the_war_on_terror/). What Trump’s generals want a gullible public (and astonishingly gullible and inattentive members of Congress) to believe is that this time they’ve somehow devised a formula for getting it right.

Turning the Corner

With his trademark capacity to intuit success, President Trump already sees clear evidence of progress. “We’re not fighting anymore to just walk around,” he remarked in his Thanksgiving message

(http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/11/23/watch_trump_s_halting_thanksgiving_day_message_to_troops_about_himself.html) to the troops. “We’re fighting to win. And you people [have] turned it around over the last three to four months like nobody has seen.” The president, we may note, has yet to visit Afghanistan.

I’m guessing that the commander-in-chief is oblivious to the fact that, in U.S. military circles, the term *winning* has acquired notable elasticity. Trump may think that it implies vanquishing the enemy — white flags and surrender ceremonies on the U.S.S. *Missouri*.

General Nicholson knows better. “Winning,” the field commander says (<http://thehill.com/policy/defense/361755-top-us-commander-in-afghanistan-still-in-a-stalemate-but-gaining-momentum>), “means delivering a negotiated settlement that reduces the level of violence and protecting the homeland.” (Take that definition at face value and we can belatedly move Vietnam into the win column!)

Should we be surprised that Trump’s generals, unconsciously imitating General William Westmoreland a half-century ago, claim once again to detect light at the end of the tunnel? Not at all. Mattis and Nicholson (along with White House Chief of Staff John Kelly and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster) are following the Harvey Weinstein playbook: keep doing it until they make you stop. Indeed, with what can only be described aschutzpah, Nicholson himself recently announced that we have “turned the corner (<http://thehill.com/policy/defense/362205-top-us-general-in-afghanistan-says-taliban-fight-has-turned-the-corner>)” in Afghanistan. In doing so, of course, he is counting on Americans not to recall the various war managers, military and civilian alike, who have made identical claims going back years now, among them Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in 2012 (<https://nypost.com/2012/09/21/us-surge-troops-out-of-afghanistan-panetta-says/>).

From on high, assurances of progress; in the field, results that, year after year, come nowhere near what’s promised; on the homefront, an astonishingly credulous public. The war in Afghanistan has long since settled into a melancholy and seemingly permanent rhythm.

The fact is that the individuals entrusted by President Trump to direct U.S. policy believe with iron certainty that difficult political problems will yield to armed might properly employed. That proposition is one to which generals like Mattis and Nicholson have devoted a considerable part of their lives, not just in Afghanistan but across much of the Islamic world. They are no more likely to question the validity of that proposition than the Pope is to entertain second thoughts about the divinity of Jesus Christ.

In Afghanistan, their entire worldview — not to mention the status and clout of the officer corps they represent — is at stake. No matter how long the war there lasts, no matter how many “generations (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/petraeus-afghan-war-generational-struggle-will-not-end-soon>)” it takes, no matter how much blood is shed to no purpose, and no matter how much money is wasted, they will never admit to failure — nor will any of the militarists-in-mufti cheering them on from the sidelines in Washington, Donald Trump not the least among them.

Meanwhile, the great majority of the American people, their attention directed elsewhere — it’s the season for holiday shopping, after all — remain studiously indifferent to the charade being played out before their eyes.

It took a succession of high-profile scandals before Americans truly woke up to the plague of sexual harassment and assault. How long will it take before the public concludes that they have had enough of wars that don’t work? Here’s hoping it’s before our president, in a moment of ill temper, unleashes “fire and fury (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions-nuclear-missile-united-nations.html>)” on the world.

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Andrew J. Bacevich, a TomDispatch regular
(http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176277/tomgram%3A_andrew_bacevich%2C_what_obsessing_about_you-know-who_causes_us_to_miss/), is the author of *America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/0553393952/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20>), now out in paperback. His next book will be an interpretive history of the United States from the end of the Cold War to the election of Donald Trump. Follow TomDispatch on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/TomDispatch>) and join us on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/tomdispatch>). Check out the newest Dispatch Book, Alfred McCoy’s *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1608467732/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20>), as well as John Dower’s *The Violent American Century: War and Terror Since World War II* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1608467236/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20>), John Feffer’s dystopian novel *Splinterlands* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1608467244/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20>), Nick Turse’s *Next Time They’ll Come to Count the Dead* (<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1608466485/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20>), and Tom Engelhardt’s *Shadow Government: Surveillance, Secret Wars, and a Global Security State in a Single-Superpower World* (<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1608463656/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20>). Copyright 2017 Andrew Bacevich.

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DECEMBER 18, 2017 ([HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664015](http://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664015))

KHOSROW

If legally, the politicians and media moguls and journalists who tenaciously advocate war and destruction were compelled to join the infantry (foot soldiers) on the front line with all their family members and their most precious belongings, then instead of genocidal wars we would certainly see 'prolonged' negotiation after negotiation, rather bloodshed based on deceit and fake reports – as none of them would wish to see his family savagely killed or give his own life, not even for a posthumous decoration with some objects. Wars have become easier because fooling the young has become a 'lucrative' business.



DECEMBER 17, 2017 ([HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664012](http://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664012))

DON BACON

([HTTPS://PLUS.GOOGLE.COM/113040757581905658893](https://plus.google.com/113040757581905658893))

Required reading — War Is The Health Of The State, by Randolph Bourne (1918).

excerpt–

“ . . . The moment war is declared, however, the mass of the people, through some spiritual alchemy, become convinced that they have willed and executed the deed themselves. They then, with the exception of a few malcontents, proceed to allow themselves to be regimented, coerced, deranged in all the environments of their lives, and turned into a solid manufactory of destruction toward whatever other people may have, in the appointed scheme of things, come within the range of the Government's disapprobation. The citizen throws off his contempt and indifference to Government, identifies himself with its purposes, revives all his military memories and symbols, and the State once more walks, an august presence, through the imaginations of men. Patriotism becomes the dominant feeling, and produces immediately that intense and hopeless confusion between the relations which the individual bears and should bear toward the society of which he is a part. . . . ”



DECEMBER 17, 2017 ([HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664009](http://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664009))

JAMES LARRIMORE

Let's keep this discussion going loud and clear, as a preemptive strike- possibly nuclear- on North Korea and a massive military assault on Iran are under real consideration by this Administration. Let's push Andrew Bacewicz's point that we – American citizens – are guilty for wars of choice initiated by the U.S. Yes, all of us, bear the guilt.



DECEMBER 17, 2017 ([HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664005](http://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664005))

FARHANG JAHANPOUR

An excellent article! Many people who are not hostile towards America, on the contrary, admire many fine things about America, such as its freedom of expression, the warmth of its people, their hospitality and friendliness, the strength of democracy, etc. have complained about the dominant effect of the Military-Industrial Complex that has made Americans addicted to war and bloodshed. However, when others say this about America it may be interpreted as malice and anti-American feelings, but when a retired American career officer and a distinguished university professor and historian of war complains about American addiction to war his comments should be taken seriously, especially under the current administration that is dominated by generals and billionaires.

America's strength lies in its ideals not in its military power. The whole of the Middle East has been shattered during the past few decades as the result of ill-conceived American military adventures, which have impoverished those countries as well as America. It is important to cure that addiction before the scourge of war takes many more victims at home and abroad. May be the time has come to outlaw any form of war, except one sanctioned specifically by the Security Council when all other options have been exhausted. In view of the deadly nature of modern means of mass destruction either we overcome wars or all of us will fall victim to their destructive power.



DECEMBER 17, 2017 ([HTTP://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664004](http://LOBELOG.COM/A-COUNTRY-ADDICTED-TO-WAR/#COMMENT-664004))

KHOSROW

“How long will it take before the public concludes that they have had enough of wars that don't work?”

In April 1967, Muhammad Ali, the boxer, refusing to be inducted into the US army to fight in Vietnam, made a memorable denunciation of the war and ‘all those who support the war’ and ‘the critics of the press’: “I ain't got no quarrel with those Vietcong”:

“My conscious won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud, for big powerful America. And shoot them for ‘what’? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me, they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father. Well, shoot them for what? ...How can I shoot them poor people, babies and children how can I shoot them poor people, Just take me to jail.”

In other words, wars will continue as long as the American entertainment industry, the mainstream media, the neocon politicians, neocon critics and pro-Zionist intellectuals continue to convince the ‘American People’ that the wars are to protect them from ‘savage’ destabilizing enemies waiting to eliminate their democracy and freedom, even if the enemy is on another planet. Above all: as long as they succeed to convince the ‘American People’ that the barbaric genocidal wars perpetrated by the US Army are ‘noble’ causes which are the US Army's duty, hence the ‘American People’ are NOT complicit in any mass murder, because it is only in ‘self-defence’, hence the American People’ should bear NO guilt, NO moral responsibility, and NO regret! They should enjoy their Xmas shopping and funny television programs and comedies while the American made bombs are falling on women and children in Yemen tearing them into pieces, compounding their homes by the US ‘allies’ who have been trained by the sons and husbands and brothers of the ‘American People’.