

Tomdispatch Interview: Chalmers Johnson on Our Military Empire

[Note to Tomdispatch readers: This is the seventh in an ongoing series of interviews at the site. The last three were with Juan Cole (parts 1 and 2), Ann Wright, and Mark Danner. Tom.]

Cold Warrior in a Strange Land

A Tomdispatch Interview with Chalmers Johnson (Part 1)

As he and his wife Sheila drive me through downtown San Diego in the glare of mid-day, he suddenly exclaims, "Look at that structure!" I glance over and just across the blue expanse of the harbor is an enormous aircraft carrier. "It's the *U.S.S. Ronald Reagan*," he says, "the newest carrier in the fleet. It's a floating Chernobyl and it sits a proverbial six inches off the bottom with two huge atomic reactors. You make a wrong move and there goes the country's seventh largest city."

Soon, we're heading toward their home just up the coast in one of those fabled highway traffic jams that every description of Southern California must include. "We feel we're far enough north," he adds in the kind of amused tone that makes his company both alarming and thoroughly entertaining, "so we could see the glow, get the cat, pack up, and head for Quartzsite, Arizona."

Chalmers Johnson, who served in the U.S. Navy and now is a historian of American militarism, lives cheek by jowl with his former service. San Diego is the headquarters of the 11th Naval District. "It's wall to wall military bases right up the coast," he comments. "By the way, this summer the Pentagon's planning the largest naval concentration in the Pacific in the post-World War II period! Four aircraft-carrier task forces -- two from the Atlantic and that's almost unprecedented -- doing military exercises off the coast of China."

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Tomdispatch.com is researched, written and edited by Tom Engelhardt ([bio](#)), a fellow at the Nation Institute, for anyone in despair over post-September 11th US mainstream media coverage of our world and ourselves. The service is intended to introduce you to voices from elsewhere (even when the elsewhere is here) who might offer a clearer sense of how this imperial globe of ours actually works.

An editor in publishing for the last 25 years, Tom is the author of *The End of Victory Culture*, a history of American triumphalism in the Cold War era. He is at present consulting editor for Metropolitan Books, a fellow of the Nation Institute, and a teaching fellow at the journalism school of the University of California, Berkeley.

That afternoon, we seat ourselves at his dining room table. He's seventy-four years old, crippled by rheumatoid arthritis and bad knees. He walks with a cane, but his is one of the spriest minds in town. Out the window I can see a plethora of strange, oversized succulents. ("That's an *Agave attenuata*," he says. "If you want one, feel free. We have them everywhere. When the blue-gray Tequila plant blooms, its flower climbs 75 feet straight up! Then you get every hummingbird in Southern California.") In the distance, the Pacific Ocean gleams.

Johnson is wearing a black t-shirt that, he tells me, a former military officer and friend brought back from Russia. ("He was amused to see hippies selling these in the Moscow airport.") The shirt sports an illustration of an AK-47 on its front with the inscription, "Mikhail Kalashnikov" in Cyrillic script, and underneath, "The freedom fighter's friend, a product of the Soviet Union." On the back in English, it says, "World Massacre Tour" with the following list: "The Gulf War, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Angola, Laos, Nicaragua, Salvador, Lebanon, Gaza Strip, Karabakh, Chechnya... To be continued."

Johnson, who served as a lieutenant (jg) in the Navy in the early 1950s and from 1967-1973 was a consultant for the CIA, ran the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley for years. He defended the Vietnam War ("In that I was distinctly a man of my times..."), but is probably the only person of his generation to have written, in the years since, anything like this passage from the introduction to his book *Blowback*: "The problem was that I knew too much about the international Communist movement and not enough about the United States government and its Department of Defense... In retrospect, I wish I had stood with the antiwar protest movement. For all its naiveté and unruliness, it was right and American policy wrong."

Retired, after a long, provocative career as a Japan specialist, he is the author of the prophetic [Blowback, The Costs and Consequences of American Empire](#), published in 2000 to little attention. After 9/11, it became a bestseller, putting the word "blowback," a CIA term for retaliation for U.S. covert actions, into common usage. He has since written [The Sorrows of Empire, Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic](#). ("As an academic subject, the American Empire is largely taboo," he tells me. "I'm now comfortably retired, but I had a successful academic career. I realize that young academics today will take up the subject and start doing research on aspects of

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our empire only if they've got some cover. They need somebody to go first. I've had some of my former graduate students say, 'Look, you're invulnerable. If you won't take the lead, why do you expect us to go do a research project on the impact of American military warehouses on Turkey. I mean, let's face it, it's a good subject!')

He is just now completing the final volume of his *Blowback Trilogy*. It will be entitled *Nemesis*.

Sharp as a tack, energetic and high-spirited, by turns genuinely alarmed and thoroughly sardonic, he's a talker by nature. Our encounter is an interview in name only. No one has ever needed an interviewer less. I do begin with a question that had been on my mind, but it's hardly necessary.

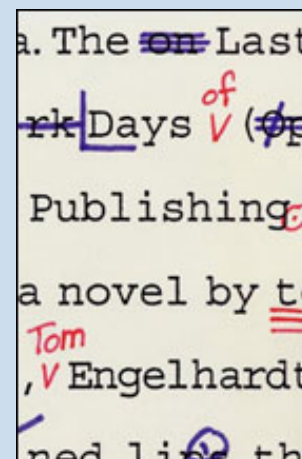
Tomdispatch: Let's start with a telltale moment in your life, the moment when the Cold War ended. What did it mean to you?

Chalmers Johnson: I was a cold warrior. There's no doubt about that. I believed the Soviet Union was a genuine menace. I still think so.

There's no doubt that, in some ways, the Soviet Union inspired a degree of idealism. There are grown men I admire who can't but stand up if they hear the *Internationale* being played, even though they split with the Communists ages ago because of the NKVD and the gulag. I thought we needed to protect ourselves from the Soviets.

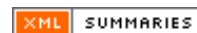
As I saw it, the only justification for our monster military apparatus, its size, the amounts spent on it, the growth of the Military-Industrial Complex that [President Dwight] [Eisenhower](#) identified for us, was the existence of the Soviet Union and its determination to match us. The fact that the Soviet Union was global, that it was extremely powerful, mattered, but none of us fully anticipated its weaknesses. I had been there in 1978 at the height of [Soviet leader Leonid] Brezhnev's power. You certainly had a sense then that no consumer economy was present. My colleagues at the Institute for the USA and Canada were full of: Oh my god, I found a bottle of good Georgian white wine, or the Cubans have something good in, let's go over to their bar; but if you went down to the store, all you could buy was vodka.

It was a fairly rough kind of world, but some things they did very, very well. We talk about missile defense for this country. To this day, there's only one nation with a



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weapon that could penetrate any missile defense we put up -- and that's Russia. And we still can't possibly match the one they have, the Topol-M, also known as the SS-27. When [President Ronald] Reagan said he was going to build a Star Wars, these very smart Soviet weapon-makers said: We're going to stop it. And they did.

As [Senator] Daniel Moynihan said: Who needs a CIA that couldn't tell the Soviet Union was falling apart in the 1980s, a \$32 billion intelligence agency that could not figure out their economy was in such awful shape they were going to come apart as a result of their war in Afghanistan and a few other things.

In 1989, [Soviet leader] Mikhail Gorbachev makes a decision. They could have stopped the Germans from tearing down the Berlin Wall, but for the future of Russia he decided he'd rather have friendly relations with Germany and France than with those miserable satellites Stalin had created in East Europe. So he just watches them tear it down and, at once, the whole Soviet empire starts to unravel. It's the same sort of thing that might happen to us if we ever stood by and watched the Okinawans kick us out of Okinawa. I think our empire might unravel in a way you could never stop once it started.

The Soviet Union imploded. I thought: What an incredible vindication for the United States. Now it's over, and the time has come for a real victory dividend, a genuine peace dividend. The question was: Would the U.S. behave as it had in the past when big wars came to an end? We disarmed so rapidly after World War II. Granted, in 1947 we started to rearm very rapidly, but by then our military was farcical. In 1989, what startled me almost more than the Wall coming down was this: As the entire justification for the Military-Industrial Complex, for the Pentagon apparatus, for the fleets around the world, for all our bases came to an end, the United States instantly -- pure knee-jerk reaction -- began to seek an alternative enemy. Our leaders simply could not contemplate dismantling the apparatus of the Cold War.

That was, I thought, shocking. I was no less shocked that the American public seemed indifferent. And what things they did do were disastrous. George Bush, the father, was President. He instantaneously declared that he was no longer interested in Afghanistan. It's over. What a huge cost we've paid for that, for creating the largest clandestine operation we ever had and then just walking away, so that any Afghan we recruited in the 1980s in the fight against the Soviet Union instantaneously came to

see us as the enemy -- and started paying us back. The biggest blowback of the lot was, of course, 9/11, but there were plenty of them before then.

I was flabbergasted and felt the need to understand what had happened. The chief question that came to mind almost at once, as soon as it was clear that our part of the Cold War was going to be perpetuated -- the same structure, the same military Keynesianism, an economy based largely on the building of weapons -- was: Did this suggest that the Cold War was, in fact, a cover for something else; that something else being an American empire intentionally created during World War II as the successor to the British Empire?.

Now that led me to say: Yes, the Cold War was not the clean-cut conflict between totalitarian and democratic values that we had claimed it to be. You can make something of a claim for that in Western Europe at certain points in the 1950s, but once you bring it into the global context, once you include China and our two East Asian wars, Korea and Vietnam, the whole thing breaks down badly and this caused me to realize that I had some rethinking to do. The wise-ass sophomore has said to me -- this has happened a number of times -- "Aren't you being inconsistent?" I usually answer with the famous remark of John Maynard Keynes, the British economist, who, when once accused of being inconsistent, said to his questioner, "Well, when I get new information, I rethink my position. What, sir, do you do with new information?"

A personal experience five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union also set me rethinking international relations in a more basic way. I was invited to Okinawa by its governor in the wake of a very serious incident. On September 4, 1995, two Marines and a sailor raped a 12-year old girl. It produced the biggest outpouring of anti-Americanism in our key ally, Japan, since the Security Treaty was signed [in 1960].

I had never been to Okinawa before, even though I had spent most of my life studying Japan. I was flabbergasted by the 32 American military bases I found on an island smaller than Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands and the enormous pressures it put on the population there. My first reaction as a good Cold Warrior was: Okinawa must be exceptional. It's off the beaten track. The American press doesn't cover it. It's a military colony. Our military has been there since the battle of Okinawa in 1945. It had all the smell of the Raj about it. But I assumed that this was just an unfortunate, if revealing, pimple on the side of our huge apparatus. As I began to study it, though, I

discovered that Okinawa was not exceptional. It was the norm. It was what you find in all of the American military enclaves around the world.

TD: The way we garrison the planet has been essential to your rethinking of the American position in the world. Your chapters on Pentagon basing policy were the heart of your last book, [The Sorrows of Empire](#). Didn't you find it strange that, whether reviewers liked the book or not, none of them seemed to deal with your take on our actual bases? What do you make of that?

Johnson: I don't know why that is. I don't know why Americans take for granted, for instance, that huge American military reservations in the United States are natural ways to organize things. There's nothing slightly natural about them. They're artificial and expensive. One of the most interesting ceremonies of recent times is the brouhaha over announced base closings. After all, it's perfectly logical for the Department of Defense to shut down redundant facilities, but you wouldn't think so from all the fuss.

I'm always amazed by the way we kid ourselves about the influence of the Military-Industrial Complex in our society. We use euphemisms like supply-side economics or the Laffer Curve. We never say: We're artificially making work. If the WPA [Works Progress Administration of the Great Depression] was often called a dig-holes-and-fill-em-up-again project, now we're making things that blow up and we sell them to people. Our weapons aren't particularly good, not compared to those of the great weapons makers around the world. It's just that we can make a lot of them very rapidly.

TD: As a professional editor, I would say that when we look at the world, we have a remarkable ability to edit it.

Johnson: Absolutely. We edit parts of it out. I mean, people in San Diego don't seem the least bit surprised that between here and Los Angeles is a huge military reservation called [Camp Pendleton](#), the headquarters of the First Marine Division. I was there myself back in the Korean War days. I unfortunately crossed the captain of the LST-883 that I was serving on. We had orders to send an officer to Camp Pendleton and he said, "I know who I'm going to send." It was me. (He laughs) And I'll never forget it. The world of Marine drill sergeants is another universe.

In many ways, as an enthusiast for the natural environment, I am delighted to have

Pendleton there. It's a *cordon sanitaire*. I spent a little time with its commandant maybe a decade ago. We got to talking about protecting birds and he said, "I'm under orders to protect these birds. One of my troops drives across a bird's nest in his tank and I'll court martial him. Now, if that goddamn bird flies over to San Clemente, he takes his chances." Even then I thought: That's one of the few things going for you guys, because nothing else that goes on here particularly contributes to our country. Today, of course, with the military eager to suspend compliance with environmental regulations, even that small benefit is gone.

TD: So, returning to our starting point, you saw an empire and...

Johnson: ...it had to be conceptualized. Empires are defined so often as holders of colonies, but analytically, by empire we simply mean the projection of hegemony outward, over other people, using them to serve our interests, regardless of how their interests may be affected.

So what kind of empire is ours? The unit is not the colony, it's the military base. This is not quite as unusual as defenders of the concept of empire often assume. That is to say, we can easily calculate the main military bases of the Roman Empire in the Middle East, and it turns out to be about the same number it takes to garrison the region today. You need about 38 major bases. You can plot them out in Roman times and you can plot them out today.

An empire of bases -- that's the concept that best explains the logic of the 700 or more military bases around the world acknowledged by the Department of Defense. Now, we're just kidding ourselves that this is to provide security for Americans. In most cases, it's true that we first occupied these bases with some strategic purpose in mind in one of our wars. Then the war ends and we never give them up. We discovered that it's part of the game; it's the perk for the people who fought the war. The Marines to this day believe they deserve to be in Okinawa because of the losses they had in the bloodiest and last big battle of World War II.

I was astonished, however, at how quickly the concept of empire -- though not necessarily an empire of bases -- became acceptable to the neoconservatives and others in the era of the younger Bush. After all, to use the term proudly, as many of them did, meant flying directly in the face of the origins of the United States. We used

to pride ourselves on being as anti-imperialist as anybody could be, attacking a king who ruled in such a tyrannical manner. That lasted only, I suppose, until the Spanish-American War. We'd already become an empire well before that, of course.

TD: Haven't we now become kind of a one-legged empire in the sense that, as you've written, just about everything has become military?

Johnson: That's what's truly ominous about the American empire. In most empires, the military is there, but militarism is so central to ours -- militarism not meaning national defense or even the projection of force for political purposes, but as a way of life, as a way of getting rich or getting comfortable. I guarantee you that the first Marine Division lives better in Okinawa than in Oceanside, California, by considerable orders of magnitude. After the Wall came down, the Soviet troops didn't leave East Germany for five years. They didn't want to go home. They were living so much better in Germany than they knew they would be back in poor Russia.

Most empires try to disguise that military aspect of things. Our problem is: For some reason, we love our military. We regard it as a microcosm of our society and as an institution that works. There's nothing more hypocritical, or constantly invoked by our politicians, than "support our boys." After all, those boys and girls aren't necessarily the most admirable human beings that ever came along, certainly not once they get into another society where they are told they are, by definition, doing good. Then the racism that's such a part of our society emerges very rapidly -- once they get into societies where they don't understand what's going on, where they shout at some poor Iraqi in English.

TD: I assume you'd agree that our imperial budget is the defense budget. Do you want to make some sense of it for us?

Johnson: Part of empire is the way it's penetrated our society, the way we've become dependent on it. Empires in the past -- the Roman Empire, the British Empire, the Japanese Empire -- helped to enrich British citizens, Roman citizens, Japanese citizens. In our society, we don't want to admit how deeply the making and selling of weaponry has become our way of life; that we really have no more than four major weapons manufacturers -- Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics -- but these companies distribute their huge contracts to as many states, as

many congressional districts, as possible.

The military budget is starting to bankrupt the country. It's got so much in it that's well beyond any rational military purpose. It equals just less than half of total global military spending. And yet here we are, stymied by two of the smallest, poorest countries on Earth. Iraq before we invaded had a GDP the size of the state of Louisiana and Afghanistan was certainly one of the poorest places on the planet. And yet these two places have stopped us.

Militarily, we've got an incoherent, not very intelligent budget. It becomes less incoherent only when you realize the ways it's being used to fund our industries or that one of the few things we still manufacture reasonably effectively is weapons. It's a huge export business, run not by the companies but by foreign military sales within the Pentagon.

This is not, of course, free enterprise. Four huge manufacturers with only one major customer. This is state socialism and it's keeping the economy running not in the way it's taught in any economics course in any American university. It's closer to what John Maynard Keynes advocated for getting out of the Great Depression -- counter-cyclical governmental expenditures to keep people employed.

The country suffers from a collective anxiety neurosis every time we talk about closing bases and it has nothing to do with politics. New England goes just as mad over shutting shut down the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard as people here in San Diego would if you suggested shutting the Marine Corps Air Station. It's always seen as *our* base. How dare you take away *our* base! Our congressmen must get it back!

This illustrates what I consider the most insidious aspect of our militarism and our military empire. We can't get off it any more. It's not that we're hooked in a narcotic sense. It's just that we'd collapse as an economy if we let it go and we know it. That's the terrifying thing.

And the precedents for this should really terrify us. The greatest single previous example of military Keynesianism -- that is, of taking an economy distraught over recession or depression, over people being very close to the edge and turning it around -- is Germany. Remember, for the five years after Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1933, he was admired as one of the geniuses of modern times. And people *were* put

back to work. This was done entirely through military Keynesianism, an alliance between the Nazi Party and German manufacturers.

Many at the time claimed it was an answer to the problems of real Keynesianism, of using artificial government demand to reopen factories, which was seen as strengthening the trade unions, the working class. Capitalists were afraid of government policies that tended to strengthen the working class. They might prove to be revolutionary. They had been often enough in that century. In this country, we were still shell-shocked over Bolshevism; to a certain extent, we still are.

What we've done with our economy is very similar to what Adolf Hitler did with his. We turn out airplanes and other weapons systems in huge numbers. This leads us right back to 1991 when the Soviet Union finally collapsed. We couldn't let the Cold War come to an end. We realized it very quickly. In fact, there are many people who believe that the thrust of the Cold War even as it began, especially in the National Security Council's grand strategy document, [NSC68](#), rested on the clear understanding of late middle-aged Americans who had lived through the Great Depression that the American economy could not sustain itself on the basis of capitalist free enterprise. And that's how -- my god -- in 1966, only a couple of decades after we started down this path, we ended up with some 32,000 nuclear warheads. That was the year of the peak stockpile, which made no sense at all. We still have 9,960 at the present moment.

Now, the 2007 Pentagon budget doesn't make sense either. It's \$439.3 billion...

TD: ... not including war...

Johnson: Not including war! These people have talked us into building a fantastic military apparatus, and then, there was that famous crack [Clinton Secretary of State] Madeleine Albright made to General Colin Powell: "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Well, if you want to use it today, they charge you another \$120 billion dollars! (He laughs.)

But even the official budget makes no sense. It's filled with weapons like [Lockheed Martin's F-22](#) -- the biggest single contract ever written. It's a stealth airplane and it's absolutely useless. They want to build another [Virginia class nuclear submarine](#). These are just toys for the admirals.

TD: When we were younger, there were always lots of articles about Pentagon boondoggles, the million-dollar military monkey wrench and the like. No one bothers to write articles like that any more, do they?

Johnson: That's because they've completely given up on decent, normal accounting at the Pentagon. **Joseph Stiglitz**, the Nobel Prize winning economist, and a colleague at Harvard have put together a real Pentagon budget which, for the wars we're fighting right now, comes out to about \$2 trillion. What they've added in are things like interest on the national debt that was used to buy arms in the past. Turns out to be quite a few billion dollars. Above all, they try to get a halfway honest figure for veterans' benefits. For this year, it's officially \$68 billion, which is almost surely way too low given, if nothing more, the huge number of veterans who applied for and received benefits after our first Gulf War.

We hear on the nightly news about the medical miracle that people can be in an explosion in which, essentially, three 155 millimeter shells go off underneath a Humvee, and they survive through heroic emergency efforts. Barely. Like **Bob Woodruff**, the anchor person from ABC News. The guy who saved his life said, I thought he was dead when I picked him up. But many of these military casualties will be wards of the state forever. Do we intend to disavow them? It leads you back to the famous antiwar cracks of the 1930s, when Congressmen used to say: There's nothing we wouldn't do for our troops -- and that's what we do, nothing.

We almost surely will have to repudiate some of the promises we've made. For instance, Tricare is the government's medical care for veterans, their families. It's a mere \$39 billion for 2007. But those numbers are going to go off the chart. And we can't afford it.

Even that pompous ideologue Donald Rumsfeld seems to have thrown in the towel on the latest budget. Not a thing is cut. Every weapon got through. He stands for "force transformation" and we already have enough nuclear equipment for any imaginable situation, so why on Earth spend anything more? And yet the Department of Energy is spending \$18.5 billion on nuclear weapons in fiscal year 2006, according to former Senior Defense Department Budget Analyst Winslow Wheeler, who is today a researcher with the Center for Defense Information.

TD: Not included in the Pentagon budget.

Johnson: Of course not. This is the Department of Energy's budget.

TD: In other words, there's a whole hidden budget...

Johnson: Oh, it's huge! Three-quarters of a trillion dollars is the number I use for the whole shebang: \$440 billion for the authorized budget; at least \$120 billion for the supplementary war-fighting budget, calculated by Tina Jones, the comptroller of the Department of Defense, at \$6.8 billion per month. Then you add in all the other things out there, above all veterans' care, care of the badly wounded who, not so long ago, would have added up to something more like Vietnam-era casualty figures. In Vietnam, they were dead bodies; these are still living people. They're so embarrassing to the administration that they're flown back at night, offloaded without any citizens seeing what's going on. It's amazing to me that [Congressman] John Murtha, as big a friend as the defense industry ever had -- you could count on him to buy any crazy missile-defense gimmick, anything in outer space -- seems to have slightly woken up only because he spent some time as an old Marine veteran going to the hospitals.

Another person who may be getting this message across to the public is [Gary Trudeau](#) in some of his Doonesbury cartoons. Tom, I know your mother was a [cartoonist](#) and we both treasure Walt Kelly, who drew the Pogo strip. How applicable is Pogo's most famous line today: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

[**Note:** *Part 2 of Chalmers Johnson's interview, "What Ever Happened to Congress?" will appear Thursday.*]

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