OMNI US NATIONAL SECURITY STATE (NSS)
NEWSLETTER #1, March 22, 2013. Compiled by Dick Bennett for a Culture of Peace.

My blog: War Department/Peace Department
http://jamesrichardbennett.blogspot.com/
My Newsletters:
http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/
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http://www.omnicenter.org/omni-newsletter-general-index/
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The NSS and its permanent war (Cold War, Drug War, War on Terror, Empire, Space War, War on China, Cyberwar) reach into countless US institutions, pervade the lives of the populace, and are the subject of many of the newsletters in OMNI’s web site, such as: Afghanistan, Air War, CIA, Civilian Victims, Fear, Homeland Security, Imperialism, Militarism, Nuclear Weapons, Patriot Act, Pentagon, Secrecy, Surveillance, Torture, War Crimes (and all of the ways to stop or reduce these harms). Thus this newsletter on NSS should be thought of as a door that opens into a thousand rooms.

Here are Dick’s most recent newsletters related to NSS:
March 19 Iraq War #4 (fourth newsletter)
3-17 Pentagon #9
3-16 Critical Thinking #3
3-16 Fear #4
3-15 Fossil Fuels Industry #2
3-15 Civil Liberties #4
3-12 Pentagon Propaganda Maching #1
3-11 PTSD #3
3-11 FOI #2
3-8 UN Women’s Day #5
3-6 Preventing Wars #1
3-5 Syria #4
3-3 US Chamber of Commerce #1
3-1 Women’s History #1
3-1 Afghan Peace Movement #2
3-1 Nuclear Free Pacific #2
February 2-24 US Capitalism
2-24 Manning #3
2-24 Torture #7
2-22 President’s Day
2-21 Literature of Enemies
2-18 Daisy Bates (racism)
2-16 Drones/Assassinations #9
2-13 Pentagon #8
2-8 Genocide #1
2-8 Peace Leaders #1
2-7 Hope #3
2-7 Black History Month
2-2 UN World Wetlands
Jan. 30, 2013 Wikileaks/Assange #10
1-28 Obama #8
1-22 Drones #8
1-21 MLK #1
1-17 US Political Prisoners #2
1-17 Nonviolence #7
1-16 Book Samplers (books on peace)
1-16 Guantanamo #4
1-14 Afghanistan-Pakistan #19
1-12 US Empire--Continental Westward Conquest #4
1-3 War Resistance, Dissent
1 CIA
2012
Dec. 31 Costs of War #5
31 Gene Sharp #1
30 Islamophobia #1
28 Economic Conversion #1
28 Nonviolence #5
etc. nearing 200 numbers on a wide variety of peace, justice, and ecology topics.

My Blog focuses on US empire, militarism, Pentagon, and peacemaking and peacemakers: War Department/Peace Department.

I am also filming “OMNI Book Sampler” on peacemaking and peacemakers on Community TV's Short Takes, shown also on my Blog.

Contents of NSS Newsletter #1
Gagnon, New Missile “Defense” in Maine
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Engelhardt on Fear USA
Dick: Pentagon vs. Towns
Graham on Military Urbanism
Engelhardt, Afghanistan and D. C.
Engelhardt, Terror Fears
Turse, President/Pentagon and Middle East Despots
Engelhardt, Post-Legal USA
Douglass, Assassination of JFK Jr

Here is the link to all OMNI newsletters:

http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/

Global Network [globalnet@mindspring.com]

Flag for follow up. Start by Friday, March 22,
No missile defense base in Maine

By Bruce K. Gagnon, Special to the BDN

Posted March 20, 2013, at 2:36 p.m.

[Military investment a poor way to create jobs; missile “defense” tests have failed; the missiles contribute to an arms race and are part of a first strike policy. Gagnon’s Global Network is a leader for missile sanity; OMNI sponsored his visit to Fayetteville around 2002. —Dick]

It is more than understandable why leaders in the Caribou area would be excited about the recent announcement by the Obama administration that a “missile defense” base on the East Coast of the U.S. will now be studied. After all we are talking about “jobs,” and what self-respecting community leader could turn away from that proposition?

Caribou, Maine, and Fort Drum, N.Y., have been mentioned as possible East Coast basing locations for the technically challenged missile defense interceptor system that the administration now plans to expand. Congress has mandated that a study be undertaken to determine the best East Coast location for the base.

Luckily we have another study to help us sort through this important jobs question. It helps us to determine just what is the most cost effective way to create jobs with our hard-earned tax dollars.

The University of Massachusetts-Amherst Economics Department has produced the definitive study on military investment as a job creating mechanism. Called “The U.S. Employment Effects of Military & Domestic Spending Priorities,” this study takes a look at how many jobs are created for every $1 billion invested in military production versus the same amount of money spent on clean energy, health care, education and other areas. In every case more jobs are created when the funds are put into the non-military investments.

In addition to the waste of our tax dollars by investing in military production, we also know that these so-called “missile defense” systems are destabilizing and will lead to a new arms race.

The Pentagon base-location studies have been justified by the supposed “nuclear threats posed by North Korea and Iran.” At this time neither of those nations have the capability to launch a rocket that could reach the continental U.S.; nor would they likely fire one even if they could. Consider the massive nuclear attack the Pentagon would likely unleash in response.
These missile defense systems have not been proven to work. When Obama first became president, he decided to de-emphasize this Boeing-led program (called the ground-based mid-course missile defense system) because it had failed to effectively perform during testing. This recent decision to ramp up the program appears to be a political one. It indicates that Boeing, and their many sub-contractors, have secured enough congressional support to put the program back on track.

This proposal is the perfect example how our democracy, and our economy, have become captives of the military industrial complex. We are reminded of President Dwight Eisenhower’s warning to us to beware of the power of the weapons industry. In his last speech to the American people before leaving office, the Republican and former Army General said, “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex.”

Further attacks on social progress here at home will be necessary to pay for these unnecessary “missile defense” deployments.

The Pentagon’s missile defense programs are actually the “shield” that accompanies U.S. first-strike attack planning. After the first-strike sword is thrust at Russia or China, those nations would theoretically launch a retaliatory response at the U.S. It is then that the Pentagon’s “missile defense” systems would be used to pick off the retaliatory strikes.

Every year, the U.S. Space Command holds war games to practice a first-strike attack on China. Both Russia and China have repeatedly complained about U.S.-NATO missile defense deployments that are now surrounding their nations.

Russia has threatened to pull out of the New Start Treaty (Obama’s 2011 agreement with Russia for modest nuclear weapons reductions) because of U.S. “missile defense” deployments.

North Korea and Iran thus have become convenient excuses for the Pentagon to develop systems that are recreating the Cold War with Russia and China and putting big bucks into the coffers of the aerospace industry.

Maine Veterans for Peace and CodePink Maine have also taken a position to join the Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space in opposing any “missile defense” base in our state and pledge to help build active opposition to it.

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In 1994, the fiction writer Charles Baxter published “Dysfunctional Narratives,” an essay in which he claims to have uncovered “the greatest influence on American fiction for the last twenty years.” His argument is an unorthodox one: Joyce, Woolf, Proust, Beckett, Kafka, Hemingway and Faulkner aren’t mentioned at all, and the person in question, it turns out, isn’t even a novelist, though he did write books (ones full of sentences that are “leaden and dulling, juridical-minded to the last, impersonal but not without savor,” and that “present the reader with camouflage masked as objective thought”). This person’s influence on America fiction, however, is traceable neither to his books nor their prose style, but rather to his apparent addiction to deniability—that noxious brew of disavowal, compartmentalization, structured ignorance and deception-as-policy through which negative outcomes become all but impossible to blame on anyone in particular. The person Baxter has in mind is none other than Richard Nixon, who brought the rhetoric of deniability to the public stage as no one had before, and who made its quintessential phrase—“mistakes were made”—a staple of American discourse about decisions and their consequences.

Baxter goes on to argue that widespread narratives of disavowal “humiliate the act of
storytelling": “You can’t reconstruct a story—you can’t even know what the story is—if everyone is saying, ‘Mistakes were made.’ Who made them? Well, everybody made them and no one did, and it’s history anyway, so we should forget about it.” Without motives, agency or resolution, our national story becomes “dysfunctional.” So too stories about the self, which attempt to address unhappiness but are ill-equipped to do so, at least when unhappiness results from the actions of governments, corporations or banks, all of which have become deniability experts. Authors create characters who are unhappy, confused or trapped—and looking for answers why. But because the misdeeds of banks, for example, are fiendishly hard to understand (often by design) and not easily shoehorned into the conventions of realist storytelling, novels are more likely to point the finger at something close by and easily named. Family life works well as a cause of unhappiness, and so does childhood trauma (even better if its memory has been repressed and the narrative can trace its recovery). “That’s the whole story,” Baxter writes glumly. “When blame has been assigned, the story is over.”

By his own description, Baxter is an author committed to fiction where characters take actions and live with their effects. “Mistakes and crimes tend to create narratives, however, and they have done so from the time of the Greek tragedies,” he notes. Consequently, the “culture of disavowals”—which Baxter sees everywhere, from talk shows to graduate fiction workshops to the acclaimed novels of the day—strikes him as a defeat: the domestication, in the most pejorative sense of the word, of life and literature by the powers that be.

Timothy Melley, a professor at Miami University, is also interested in how American fiction has been influenced by institutionalized deception from on high, particularly with regard to the covert sectors of government that came into being during and after World War II. But his account—which he eventually frames in explicit opposition to Baxter’s—locates the origins of deniability much earlier than Nixon. If deniability has an author, Melley argues in *The Covert Sphere*, it is George Kennan, who in 1948 penned National Security Council directive NSC-10/2, the document that changed the CIA, then barely one year old, from a purely intelligence-gathering outfit into an agency charged with “propaganda, economic warfare, preventive direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage” and so on. Crucially, NSC-10/2 ordered that these operations be implemented in such a way that, if discovered, “the US Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility.”

More than sixty years later, the American covert sector is a thriving, many-tentacled monster of deniability funded by at least $75 billion per year, consisting of at least
forty-five government agencies, 1,271 smaller government organizations and 1,391 private corporations. [Dick’s bold.] Thanks to the occasional revelation by investigative journalists or congressional committees, most Americans have a vague idea that the covert sector exists, that it has a great deal of power, and that it has in the past resorted to surveillance, kidnapping, torture and assassination in the name of protecting American interests. But what people know best about the covert sector is that it remains mostly unknowable by design: it lies, it keeps its past and future plans secret, it spreads misinformation both abroad and at home, and it shrouds its every move in a thick haze of overlapping cover stories and disavowals. It is the massive “known unknown” of American life, the supreme dysfunctional narrative, doing its business somewhere out of sight while we eat breakfast, or sleep, or read about it in the news without learning what it is. “Mistakes were made” implies a corollary, unspoken but I think widely felt: more mistakes are being made right now, and will remain unknown until long after the damage is done.

This is the sort of impotent half-knowledge that Baxter bemoans in “Dysfunctional Narratives.” Melley agrees that repeated exposure to lying-as-policy has been bad for everyone. Citizens have been pushed into a state of “radical unknowing,” or knowing for certain only that they really don’t know. But unlike Baxter, Melley thinks America’s writers, or at least a few of them, have risen admirably to the challenge—not by constructing narratives that Baxter would ever call functional, but by playing dysfunction for all it’s worth, the better to pinpoint its effect on the national and individual consciousness.

This is a familiar argument: radical new times have rendered obsolete familiar literary modes and pleasures. Paeans to an art that revels in its own instability, uncertainty or inconclusiveness—its intentional, self-aware dysfunctionality—are as old as literature itself, as are conservative laments such as Baxter’s. But Melley isn’t interested (or at least not exclusively so) in cheerleading for the postmodern. What makes his argument fascinating is his attention to the actual history of America’s relationship to the institutions that house its official open secrets, and to the special place in that relationship occupied by fiction.

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As the first-ever government agency with deniability written into its charter, the CIA was from the beginning a storytelling machine. It was no coincidence that in its early days the organization was full of literature students and writers recruited by influential scholars of English, or that for decades it operated as perhaps the most generous literary patron in the
West, funding scores of novels, translations and literary journals. And so it is oddly apt that most Americans know most of what they know about the covert sector—or, more accurately, half-know most of what they half-know—not from fact-oriented discourses like journalism, history and the law, but instead from novels, films, TV shows, comic books and narrative video games: in other words, through fictions, some of them quite outlandish, some chock-full of accurate information and insight, most somewhere in between, and all of them more or less dismissible as "just fiction."

Melley's boldest suggestion is that fiction about the covert activity assumes an outsize role not only for members of the general public, but also for most individuals within the covert sector. This is, he argues, a natural consequence of the secret government's size and "hypercompartmentalization," itself a natural outcome of its foundational obsession with deniability. The covert sector is so large, so fragmented into agencies, subdivisions, private contractors and shell companies—often competing with each other for funding and operational jurisdiction—that it can be difficult, if not impossible, for any one of the beast's many tentacles to know what the rest have in their clutches. This is exacerbated by complex classification schemes that parcel out information—even of a single operation—piecemeal on a "need to know" basis, a process that can leave even those with high-security clearances in the dark. Often, Melley claims, those at the top of the totem pole are the most ignorant of all, because what is required of them is not knowledge but its opposite: public expressions of shock when, against the odds, this or that unsavory activity comes to light. Even if those technically "inside" the covert state know a bit more than John Everyman, it is certainly plausible that they hanker to know more—to view the monster from above, and to see its many tentacles writhing at once. Like the rest of us, some often have nowhere better to turn than fiction.

Such a proposition is difficult to prove, but Melley attempts to marshal compelling evidence. In the 1960s, he notes, CIA employees reportedly watched Mission Impossible each week in search of ideas for new gadgets. JFK loved Ian Fleming novels and wanted America to find "our James Bond." The "ticking time bomb scenario," so endlessly invoked in recent debates over the efficacy and morality of torture, has apparently never occurred in real life but famously first appeared in Les centurions, a 1960 French thriller in which French soldiers use torture to extract information from Muslim members of the Algerian resistance. Today, the book is a favorite of US counterinsurgency professionals, including (by his own admission) David Petraeus, until recently the director of the CIA. After 9/11, the Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security started recruiting artists—including thriller author Brad
Meltzer—for Red Cell, a project dedicated to imagining how the terrorist attacks of the future might play out. The Pentagon ran a similar program. And in 2008, Defense Intelligence Agency recruits started training on Sudden Thrust, a video game written by a Hollywood screenwriter.

As has been more widely observed, the television show 24—an eight-season ticking time bomb scenario—has figured prominently in decidedly nonfictional decisions about the treatment of Muslims in US custody since 2001. At a 2002 gathering of government officials charged with cooking up new approaches to interrogation, the assembled experts concluded that one useful thing they could do was to watch 24. The show’s hero, Jack Bauer—who gets the job done by beating, drugging or electrocuting someone roughly every other episode—has been cited with approval by (to name just a few) Bush administration legal counsel John Yoo, Department of Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff, former President Bill Clinton and Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who proclaimed: “Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles…. He saved hundreds of thousands of lives…. Are you going to convict Jack Bauer?” After Osama bin Laden was killed by Navy SEALs, “Jack Bauer” became a trending topic on Twitter, with many people tweeting their thanks to this nonexistent man.

Melley devotes an entire chapter to the notoriously muddled notion of “brainwashing,” a nonsensical term for a process of total thought control that has never really existed outside of novels, movies, and hysterical think-tank studies and news stories about the Communist threat. Much of the hysteria about brainwashing was stirred up by government PR specialists: Edward Hunter, the first journalist to use the term, was a former employee of the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II forerunner of the CIA. The propaganda affected not only the public but also the compartmentalized covert sector itself. While one tentacle cooked up stories about brainwashing—which inevitably seeped into thrillers like The Manchurian Candidate—the other sank millions of dollars into the search for its antidote, or better yet, a counterweapon. Again and again, researchers were forced to conclude that there is no such thing as brainwashing, just old-fashioned torture, most useful not for changing someone’s mind or turning them into a sleeper agent, but for the age-old purpose of making someone repeat whatever story you want (or, put otherwise, for producing fiction under extreme duress).

The findings of this “Manhattan Project of the mind,” as the historian Alfred McCoy has called it, were collected in the CIA’s 1963 KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual, used for years as the basis for the military’s Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE)
training program. After 9/11, the KUBARK manual’s list of torture techniques was mined no less assiduously than episodes of 24 for ideas about how to torture men who, ironically, were often described by Western academics and journalists as having turned to terrorism as the result of some unbelievably potent, almost magical form of indoctrination. In 2004, a remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* replaced the Commie “hypnosis” of the original with a suitably futuristic “nanochip” that makes Denzel Washington do whatever his global overlords say.

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When fact and fiction crossbreed this promiscuously—especially within a powerful, weaponized bureaucracy—all manner of disasters are possible. President Eisenhower was on to something when he complained that intelligence briefings from Tehran sounded “like a dime novel”; much the same could be said for the scores of kooky terror plots cooked up by FBI agents for the purpose of entrapping Muslims. But for fiction writers, Melley argues, the state’s reliance on stories offers a way in. He quotes E.L. Doctorow approvingly: “The novelist’s opportunity to do his work today is increased by the power of the regime to which he finds himself in opposition.” The inaccessibility of key facts is a deep obstacle to journalism, history and legal inquiry, but not to novels, for which complex realities built from lies plausible enough to believe in, and rich illusions shot through with facts, are old news. As Norman Mailer put it, defending his qualifications to write fiction about the CIA: “It is a fictional CIA and its only real existence is in my mind, but I would point out that the same is true for men and women who have spent forty years working within the Agency.”

The literary stars of Melley’s account—the authors he identifies as best understanding how the nature of the covert sector creates a particularly “puzzling relation” between representation and reality—are a familiar bunch. Mailer gets credit for stressing, in *Harlot’s Ghost*, the deep affinities between spycraft and literature, and for explicitly trumpeting fiction’s unique virtues over journalism in his novelistic memoir *Armies of the Night*. Denis Johnson is praised for recasting the Vietnam War, in *Tree of Smoke*, as first and foremost a series of propaganda fictions. Doctorow and Robert Coover receive high marks for their perceptive novelistic treatments of the fiction-laced “spectacle of secrecy” that was the Rosenberg trial (retold in Coover’s *The Public Burning* and Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*). The more a work is, like our public sphere, scarred by radical unknowing, the more Melley praises it. His favorite sections of Don DeLillo’s *Libra* are not the detailed reimaginings of Lee Harvey Oswald’s life (or even of his love for James Bond), but instead the descriptions of Nicholas Branch, the fictitious CIA analyst brought out of retirement to write the agency’s
internal report on the Kennedy assassination. Day after day Branch sits in his office, paralyzed by the mounting stacks of papers around him. He has access to any agency document he requests, but he also knows that a good deal of agency work goes into destroying some documents and forging others; plus some of his requests go unanswered. He should know more than anyone else about the Kennedy assassination, but in an important sense he knows less, having lost all ability to distinguish coincidence from significance, real documents from forgeries, and actual forgeries from forged forgeries—that is, forgeries deliberately designed to look like forgeries to an analyst, and so send him down the wrong path.

Similarly, in each of Joan Didion’s three novels about the security state (A Book of Common Prayer, Democracy and The Last Thing He Wanted), a narrator sets out to tell the story of a citizen caught up in the workings of the covert sector and, inevitably, “instead narrates her own failure to tell the story she meant to tell.” Like Branch, Didion’s narrators fail in part because they don’t have access to certain data, in part because they have access to more potentially relevant data than they could ever sort, and no clue how even to begin telling the story. The fear is that filling in the covert sector’s narrative gaps—writing a speculative key to its coded maps—might only serve to obscure the truth. “I still believe in history,” says the journalist-narrator of The Last Thing He Wanted, then instantly doubles back. “Let me amend that. I still believe in history to the extent I believe history to be made exclusively and at random” by men shrouded in “entire layers of bureaucracy dedicated to the principle that self-perpetuation depended on the ability not to elucidate but obscure.” In the looking-glass world of the covert sector, functional stories of cause and effect too easily become part of a cover-up built on false understanding. The narrator of Democracy (one “Joan Didion”), surveying the story she is in the middle of telling, puts it bluntly: ”I am resisting narrative here.” Charles Baxter, we can assume, is not a fan.

For Melley, this mode finds its purest expression in Tim O’Brien’s In the Lake of the Woods. The main character, John Wade, is a Vietnam veteran traumatized by memories of the wartime atrocities he has witnessed, participated in and covered up through alterations to the record. Decades later, he wakes up one morning and discovers that his wife is gone. He remembers little of the night before, but does recall standing over her sleeping body holding a pot of boiling water. The journalist-narrator is another Vietnam vet with problems of memory and guilt. Early on, he announces that he has never figured the case out and that Wade’s wife was never found. Like DeLillo and Didion, O’Brien dramatizes the public’s relationship to the half-known goings-on of the past (“a handful of splotchy images” from Southeast Asia), but he
also gestures toward more recent events, the events of (literally) last night—events more
difficult to name because we experience them, if at all, only as a queasy awareness of what
they might have been. Mistakes are being made. “Who will ever know?” says the narrator. “It’s
all hypothesis, beginning to end.”

* * *

I admire these books; indeed, some I love, in part for the virtues Melley catalogs. And his
account of their spawning ground—the “known unknowns” of the covert sector—is
fascinating. But his response to Baxter’s argument in “Dysfunctional Narratives” is deeply
dissatisfying. Baxter’s essay explores how large dysfunctional systems might influence fiction
about subjects other than systems: how distortions of power subtly discourage artists from
writing about power in the first place, whether or not their subject is explicitly political. To
respond, as Melley does, by noting that an extremely small handful of authors have
successfully written about systems is almost a non sequitur.

What Melley’s account reveals most about his favorite books is how dismayingly similar they
are—and not just in their self-aware “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” approach to storytelling. Almost
every book he discusses has at its center a character drawn by circumstance into the
dysfunction of the covert sector. In The Last Thing He Wanted, the narrator discovers that her
father is an arms dealer. In Democracy, the main character is having an affair with a CIA
agent. Both main characters in A Book of Common Prayer are married to prominent players in
the secret government. John Wade, the amnesiac veteran from In the Lake of the Woods, is a
direct participant in a military atrocity and the cover-up. The principal narrator of Coover’s The
Public Burning is Vice President Richard Nixon himself. DeLillo’s Nicholas Branch works in
the belly of the CIA, and his Lee Harvey Oswald is, well, Lee Harvey Oswald.

This relative uniformity of approach is evidence of a shortcoming at least as significant as the
type pinpointed by Baxter. It may seem natural that fiction hoping to plumb the conceptual
depths of the covert sector should involve its biggest institutions. But one of Melley’s central
claims is that the nature of the covert sector has contributed to postmodern shifts in the
nature of all public knowledge—not just knowledge about CIA coups, for example. The
authors he spotlights are similarly obsessed with the idea of the secret services as pockets of
the national unconscious. Here’s the narrator of DeLillo’s The Names, a man who works for
the CIA but doesn’t know it:

If America is the world’s living myth, then the CIA is America’s myth. All the themes are there,
in tiers of silence, whole bureaucracies of silence, in conspiracies and doublings and brilliant betrayals. The agency takes on shapes and appearances, embodying whatever we need at a given time to know ourselves or unburden ourselves.

But doesn’t the unconscious find expression in daily life? By which I mean: Shouldn’t it be possible to write an essentially realistic novel that contains not a single secret government plot but nonetheless makes contact with the scars those plots have left on the national psyche? Other than a few halfhearted pages on John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, this possibility merits no real consideration in *The Covert Sphere*. In this regard, the book operates in ignorance of one of its most important insights: that the work of the covert sector extends far beyond the confines of the CIA’s offices and involves the uneasy acceptance of radical unknowing, which comes in an ever-multiplying number of forms and is a presence in all our lives—even if we’re not paranoiacs who work in the CIA archives or write newsletters about how 9/11 was an inside job, even if our fathers are not international arms dealers, even if we are knowing readers of high-concept novels. Not only that, but Melley’s way of thinking about the relationship between literature and politics leaves little room for the possibility that the best novels about 9/11 or World War I or Vietnam could be ones that do not mention or even bear direct traces of these conflicts.

* * *

There is a basic truth about the covert sector that is remarkably easy to overlook: however unknowable and mysterious it may be—however much it may seem to be a separate reality parallel to ours—it is not literally another world. Remote military outposts, for example, are buildings like any other, occupying space, requiring plumbing and electricity. Such banal facts are at the center of fascinating work by Trevor Paglen, whom Melley mentions only in passing, perhaps because Paglen doesn’t write fiction. His work is part investigative journalism, part geography, part art photography. Many of his projects have involved scrounging for information about where exactly in the physical world the work of the covert state gets done: its torture dungeons; the remote airports where planes shuttling from dungeon to dungeon land for fuel; the spots in the night sky where surveillance satellites lurk; the small offices in strip malls that house CIA shell companies. Then he gets as close as he can and takes photographs, often using an extremely high-powered lens. Paglen also trains his camera on smaller traces of covert activity: leases and purchase orders signed by nonexistent people; uniform patches for government programs mentioned in no congressional budget. Encountering these images for the first time, I felt a dizzying sense of revelation, all
the more dizzying because I knew their central claim—that the covert sector exists in physical space—was completely obvious. I was, I suppose, metasurprised: surprised to find myself surprised.

There are many such moments in the British filmmaker Patrick Keiller’s “Robinson” trilogy. Each of its installments consists almost entirely of static shots of English cities and countryside accompanied by voice-overs from an invisible narrator who relates the observations of a London-obsessed loner named Robinson. Keiller’s camera captures lichen growing on roadway signs; supermarkets, busy intersections and freeways; spiders spinning cobwebs—and also the British covert sector, in the form of restricted-access military bases, some still in use and hidden behind fences and foliage, others deserted and weathered and beginning to be reclaimed by the land. Keiller is implicitly convinced that it’s all connected, but less in the manner of a DeLillo paranoiac and more like a nature writer describing a physical journey through an ecosystem.

Keiller has professed his love for W.G. Sebald’s 1995 novel The Rings of Saturn, in which the anonymous narrator (a man not unlike Keiller’s Robinson) describes his walking tour along the southeast coast of England. In a memorable seven-page passage he recalls wandering Orford Ness, a small, narrow peninsula that for much of the twentieth century was owned by the British Ministry of Defense, which used it to test phosphorus shells, nuclear detonators and who knows what else. Today its barracks, bunkers, blast chambers and watchtowers sit deserted. Sebald’s narrator has heard many rumors about the base at Orford Ness and suspects that much of its past is unknowable, thanks to probable tampering with the records in advance of their declassification. He acquires no new facts on his walk. To the contrary: the more he walks, the less he feels he knows. “Where and in what time I truly was that day…I cannot say, even now as I write these words.” This sounds like an extreme version of Melley’s “radical unknowing.” But the passage is also a straightforward account of an afternoon’s walk, a walk that any Briton with a free afternoon and train fare could take herself. And so, however much remains hidden to the narrator, he also claims a modest knowing: he was there; he saw what he could see; he kept walking, kept thinking.

Whether this meets Baxter’s standard for functional narrative, I don’t know—but it’s surely at least a modest start. It seems clear that American letters could use a small army of Paglens, Keillers and Sebalds roaming our geographies of secrecy, pens and cameras in hand. In fact, one of the best living describers of the American landscape, John McPhee, published a fascinating book in 1984 called La Place de la Concorde Suisse, in which he travels around
Switzerland with an army information patrol. In the process he charts the myriad ways the country’s military aims have shaped its social structures, economy and, most of all, land. Bridges are wired to blow, the mountains are full of camouflaged airplane hangars and cannon turrets, and almost every man of fighting age has a gun, ammo and a gas mask in the house. “There is scarcely a scene in Switzerland that is not ready to erupt in fire,” McPhee writes. “About this we don’t talk,” a colonel tells him. “But keep your eyes open. You may see something.”

*Also in this issue, Marcy Wheeler inquires into whether Congress can protect Americans against the increasingly invasive security state.*

**Peter C. Baker**

*December 19, 2012 | This article appeared in the January 7-14, 2013 edition of The Nation.*

Buy this book

About the Author

**Peter C. Baker**

Peter C. Baker lives in Chicago and Wilmington, North Carolina.

Also by the Author

**Peter C. Baker**

*For Real: Torture America Style* ([Covert Ops, War on Terrorism, Non-fiction, Books and the Arts](#))

Institutionalized torture says not look what we can do, but look what we disown, what only the bad apples among us require.

**Peter C. Baker**


UFPPC ([www.ufppc.org](http://www.ufppc.org)) Digging Deeper LXXVII: March 30, 2009, 7:00 p.m.

Introduction: Overblown.

Thesis: "[O]ur reaction against terrorism has caused more harm than the threat warrants—not just to civil liberties, not just to the economy, but even to human lives" (2). Most Americans have "a false sense of insecurity" (3). Similar periods of fear have occurred in the past; our efforts should be devoted to reducing harmful fears (4-5). Current policy actually stokes these fears (6-7). Policing should be the priority, not making war (7-8). We can learn from the past in this regard (8-10).

PART I: TERRORISM'S IMPACT

Chapter 1: The Limited Destructiveness of Terrorism.

The actual danger of dying from terrorism is about the same as being killed by lightning (based on statistics since the late 1960s) (13). The practical problems for use of WMD in terrorist attacks have been vastly underestimated by commentators (14-24). Predictions that one terrorist attack will be followed by more of the same have not turned out to be true (25-28).

Chapter 2: Overreacting to Terrorism: The Terrorism Industry.

Most of the harm from terrorism is inflicted by the overreaction of those attacked (29). Harm from overreaction to 9/11 has "massively outstripped" the harm from the event itself (29-32). Politicians have inflated the fear (33-36). Need to CYA leads bureaucrats to play up the danger (37-39). Media ignore statistical demonstrations of the small size of the threat (39-41). "Risk entrepreneurs" stoke fears, too (41-43). Commentators' fears are ridiculously apocalyptic (43-47). "[T]he enemy, in fact, is us" (47).

PART II: HISTORICAL COMPARISONS

Chapter 3: Dates of Infamy: Pearl Harbor and 9/11.

Reports at the time exaggerated the impact of Pearl Harbor (52). A containment strategy toward Japan should have been considered but was not (53-58). Many similarities to 9/11 in reactions to the event (58-66).

Chapter 4: Cold War, Containment, and Conspiracy.

Application of Kennan's containment doctrine led to a series of overreactions (67-70). To the coup in Czechoslovakia (70-72). There was no intention or planning on the part of the Soviet Union to attack the capitalist world militarily (72-74). Korea was only a military project of an enthusiastic ally, Kim Il-sung; there were no further such attacks (75). The "missile gap" hysteries and the Gaither Report were overreactions (as Eisenhower saw) (76-78). The U.S. overreacted to Cuba (79). Vietnam was an overreaction to indirect aggression (79-80). The U.S. overreacted to the invasion of Afghanistan (81-83). The evidence does not suggest that containment of the Soviet Union was the reason the USSR collapsed; internal causes were at work (84-86). Fear of an internal enemy, once created, declines only very gradually (86-89). Inflation of the threat and a tendency to take "a challenging episode as a harbinger" typify reactions both to internal communism and international terrorism (90-92).

Chapter 5: Nuclear Fears, Cold War Terrorism, and Devils du Jour.
Concerns about nuclear apocalypse have waxed and waned, but not in proportion to danger (93-99). Brief commentaries on a series of "devils du jour"; in each case they turn out not to have been as dangerous as feared—Tito, Kim Il-sung, Castro, Nasser, Sukarno, Qaddafi, Khomeini, Japan's economic prowess (100-11). Beginning with Carter, there has been an unhealthy presidential obsession with terrorism (111-14). In general, policies are all too often dictated by "concerns inspired by rhetoric and posturing" and reflect emotional rather than rational reactions (114-15).

Chapter 6: Disorderliness in the New World Order.

After the Cold War, obsessions with new problems emerged (117-18). "Complexity" was elevated, absurdly, to the status of a new threat (118-20). The Samuel Huntington clash-of-civilizations crowd promoted "ethnic warfare" to the status of a general threat, but this was vastly exaggerated (120-22). In fact, there are fewer wars around than ever at present (if war is defined as a conflict producing 1000+ combat deaths a year) (122). Most recently, the U.S. has promoted "rogue states" to the status of a general problem: Panama, North Korea, Iraq (122-35). Conclusions: 1) When big problems recede, small ones are duly magnified (135); 2) There is a need for simplistic explanations the public can grasp (135-36); 3) Nothing compares to the appeal of a devil du jour (136); 4) Leaders easily become too engaged emotionally with minor challenges (136-37); 5) Dramatic events can be used to push preexisting agendas (137).

PART III: APPROACHING TERROR AND TERRORISM


Since terrorism aims to terrify, a rational strategy to combat it must seek to reduce fears to a reasonable level (141-42). An alternative policy is proposed: an emphasis on reasonable goals (complete security is impossible) and on policing, prevention, and absorbing losses; educating people to reduce their fears (a difficult task), engaging in practices (even irrational ones) that demonstrably do reduce fears (144-65). Policy overreactions also need to be restrained (165-70).

Chapter 8: Terrorism and Terror.

The "war" on terrorism is going relatively well, thanks mostly to ordinary police work; the "war" on terror is not, due to the stoking of public fears (173-74). Given the FBI's inability to find a single true terrorist cell anywhere in the United States after years of obsessive questing, it is not unreasonable to suspect that "perhaps terrorists scarcely exist in the United States" (180; 179; 174-82). It may also be that 9/11 and subsequent al-Qaeda terrorism has proved counterproductive (182-85). "It is not entirely clear that the U.S. war in Afghanistan was really that much of a requirement in the campaign against international terrorism" (185; 185-87). Invading Iraq may prove to be counterproductive to the U.S., but measuring this will be difficult (187-90). In the U.S., an "Iraq syndrome" is likely to develop: an attack on Iran could be even more counterproductive for the U.S. (192). The likelihood that the U.S. can be freed from fear-mongers seems nil, however (193-96).

The United States of Fear:

- Globalization & Imperialism
In 2008, when the US National Intelligence Council issued its latest report meant for the administration of newly elected President Barack Obama, it predicted that the planet's "sole superpower" would suffer a modest decline and a soft landing fifteen years hence. In his new book *The United States of Fear*, Tom Engelhardt makes clear that Americans should don their crash helmets and buckle their seat belts, because the United States is on the path to a major decline at a startling speed. Engelhardt offers a savage anatomy of how successive administrations in Washington took the "Soviet path"—pouring American treasure into the military, war, and national security—and so helped drive their country off the nearest cliff.

This is the startling tale of how fear was profitably shot into the national bloodstream, how the country—gripped by terror fantasies—was locked down, and how a brain-dead Washington elite fiddled (and profited) while America quietly burned.

Think of it as the story of how the Cold War really ended, with the triumphalist "sole superpower" of 1991 heading slowly for the same exit through which the Soviet Union left the stage twenty years earlier.

**About the author**

Tom Engelhardt created and runs TomDispatch.com, a project of The Nation Institute, where he is a fellow. He is the author of *The American Way of War*, *The End of Victory Culture*, and of a novel, *The Last Days of Publishing*, as well as a collection of his TomDispatch interviews, *Mission Unaccomplished*.

**Reviews**

**Praise for Tom Engelhardt’s *The American Way of War***

"Tom Engelhardt’s biting look at United States militarism... [is] pithy... [and] alarming.... He takes on our war-possessed world with clear-eyed, penetrating precision."
—Mother Jones Online

"Essential.... seamlessly edited.... establishes him as one of the grand chroniclers of the post–9/11 era."
—Dan Froomkin, Nieman Watchdog

"These simple pleas for readers to reconsider an idea they might previously have taken for granted are one of the strengths of this book. Engelhardt avoids the overly strident or self-righteous condescension that characterizes too much online political writing, instead using clear and unvarnished prose to attack the fundamental principles of the post–September 11 mindset."
—Foreign Policy in Focus
"Tom Engelhardt, as always, focuses his laser-like intelligence on a core problem that the media avoid: Obama's stunning embrace of Bush's secret government by surveillance, torture, and sanctioned assassination. A stunning polemic."
—Mike Davis, author of *In Praise of Barbarians* and *Planet of Slums*

“With an excellent mind and an equally fine pen, Engelhardt demonstrates true patriotism to the American founding.... Reading such good prose invigorates like little else in this world of sorrows. But one should not consider Engelhardt merely a writer of golden prose. This body has a soul as well, and Engelhardt convincingly presents evidence as well as argument throughout the book.... The American Way of War is brimming with insights.”
—The American Conservative

"Reading this book feels like poking around with a flashlight in the unexamined corners of the post-9/11 American imperial mindset."
—Socialist

PUBLIC DOESN’T GET IT, CAN’T SEE IT, DON’T CARE
By Dick Bennett
Daily in many articles various local government agencies lament the “unavoidability,” the “unfortunate necessity” of cutting their budget—their services to the public, their benefits to their workers. Never any mention of that insatiable monster in our living room devouring food and furniture: the US Military.

And it’s not only officials deciding to cut services and refusing to acknowledge the military cause of their financial distress: even the public votes for the cuts without a word about the costly wars. For example, the Associated Press report by Elliot Spagat, “Pension-Cut Votes Called Stage Setters” (6-7-12) tells us that the voters of the Californian cities of San Diego and San Jose “overwhelmingly approved cuts to retirement benefits for city workers.” The city had presented to the public a choice between cutting pensions or cutting hours at the libraries and leaving potholes unfilled, and the people cut their employees. No mention of the third choice—to sustain the current pensions, library hours, road quality by cutting the US Security State with its enormous, unnecessary Pentagon and top, top secret bureaucracies.

City, county, state leaders: wake up, speak up.

Cities as Battlespace: The New Military Urbanism

Thursday, 25 November 2010
18:00 - 19:00
Location: CRASSH, 17 Mill Lane, Cambridge

Stephen Graham (Professor of Cities and Society, Global Urban Research Unit, School of Architecture, Newcastle University)
This lecture draws on a newly-published book - *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (Verso, 2010) -- to explore emerging crossovers between the ‘targeting’ of everyday life in so-called ‘smart’ border and ‘homeland security’ programmes and related efforts to delegate the sovereign power to deploy lethal force to increasingly robotized and automated war machines. Arguing that both cases represent examples of a new military urbanism, the rest of the lecture will develop a thesis outlining the scope and power of contemporary interpenetrations between urbanism and militarism. The new military urbanism is defined as encompassing a complex set of rapidly evolving ideas, doctrines, practices, norms, techniques and popular cultural arenas through which the everyday spaces, sites and infrastructures of cities—along with their civilian populations—are now rendered as the main targets and threats within a limitless ‘battlespace’. The new military urbanism, it is argued, rests on five related pillars; these are explored in turn. Included here are the normalization of militarized practices of tracking and targeting everyday urban circulations; the two-way movement of political, juridical and technologi-cal techniques between ‘homeland’ cities and cities on colonial frontiers; the rapid growth of sprawling, transnational industrial complexes fusing military and security companies with technology, surveillance and entertainment ones; the deployment of political violence against and through everyday urban infrastructure by both states and non-state fighters; and the increasingly seamless fusing of militarized veins of popular, urban and material culture. The talk finishes by discussing the new political imaginations demanded by the new military urbanism.

**Bored to Death in Afghanistan (and Washington)**

**Mating Déjà Vu with a Mobius Strip in the Graveyard of Empire**

**By Tom Engelhardt**

[Opener: Three examples of brainless security mania.—Dick]

One day in October 2001, a pilot for Northwest Airlines refused to let Arshad Chowdhury, a 25-year-old American Muslim (“with a dark complexion”) who had once worked as an investment banker in the World Trade Center, board his plane at San Francisco National Airport. According to Northwest’s gate agents, Chowdhury writes in the *Washington Post*, “he thought my name sounded suspicious” even though “airport security and the FBI verified that I posed no threat.” He sued.

Now, skip nearly a decade. It’s May 6, 2011, and two New York-based African-American imams, a father and son, attempting to take an American Airlines flight from New York to Charlotte to attend a conference on "prejudice against Muslims," were prevented from flying. The same thing happened to two imams in Memphis “dressed in traditional long shirts and [with] beard,” heading for the same conference, when a pilot for Atlantic Southeast refused to fly with them aboard, even though they had been screened three times.

So how is the war in Afghanistan going almost 10 years later? Or do you think that’s a non sequitur? I don’t, and let me suggest two reasons why: first, boredom; second, the missing learning curve. MORE [http://aep.typepad.com/american_empire_project/2011/05/bored-to-death-in-afghanistan-and-washington.html#more](http://aep.typepad.com/american_empire_project/2011/05/bored-to-death-in-afghanistan-and-washington.html#more)

**100% Scared**

How the National Security Complex Grows on Terrorism Fears
By Tom Engelhardt

Here’s a scenario to chill you to the bone:

Without warning, the network -- a set of terrorist super cells -- struck in northern Germany and Germans began to fall by the hundreds, then thousands. As panic spread, hospitals were overwhelmed with the severely wounded. More than 20 of the victims died.

No one doubted that it was al-Qaeda, but where the terrorists had come from was unknown. Initially, German officials accused Spain of harboring them (and the Spanish economy promptly took a hit); then, confusingly, they retracted the charge. Alerts went off across Europe as fears spread. Russia closed its borders to the European Union, which its outraged leaders denounced as a “disproportionate” response. Even a small number of Americans visiting Germany ended up hospitalized.

6/9/2011

Read more>>>

http://aep.typepad.com/american_empire_project/2011/06/100-scared.html#more

Obama’s Reset: Arab Spring or Same Old Thing?
How the President and the Pentagon Prop Up Both Middle Eastern Despots and American Arms Dealers

By Nick Turse

If you follow the words, one Middle East comes into view; if you follow the weapons, quite another.

This week, the words will take center stage. On Thursday, according to administration officials, President Obama will “reset” American policy in the Middle East with a major address offering a comprehensive look at the Arab Spring, “a unified theory about the popular uprisings from Tunisia to Bahrain,” and possibly a new administration approach to the region.

In the meantime, all signs indicate that the Pentagon will quietly maintain antithetical policies, just as it has throughout the Obama years. Barring an unprecedented and almost inconceivable policy shift, it will continue to broker lucrative deals to send weapons systems and military equipment to Arab despots. Nothing indicates that it will be deterred from its course, whatever the president says, which means that Barack Obama’s reset rhetoric is unlikely to translate into meaningful policy change in the region.

5/17/2011

Read more>>>

http://aep.typepad.com/american_empire_project/2011/05/obamas-reset-arab-spring-or-same-old-thing.html#more

“Dumb Question of the Twenty-first Century: Is It Legal? Post-Legal America and the National Security Complex”  By Tom Engelhardt

Is the Libyan war legal? Was Bin Laden’s killing legal? Is it legal for the president of the United States to target an American citizen for assassination? Were those “enhanced interrogation techniques” legal? These are all questions raised in recent weeks. Each seems to call out for debate, for answers. Or does it?
Now, you couldn’t call me a legal scholar. I’ve never set foot inside a law school, and in 66 years only made it onto a single jury (dismissed before trial when the civil suit was settled out of court). Still, I feel at least as capable as any constitutional law professor of answering such questions.

5/31/2011

http://americanempireproject.com/

**Douglass, Jim. JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters.** Interv. *The Servant Song* (Fall 2010). Agape Community. Agape: Pres. Kennedy “stood up to his own national security state and his generals….He wanted to end the war in Vietnam, looked to abolish nuclear weapons and finally end war as we know it. He was planning to pursue rapprochement with Castro through Khrushchev. Douglass: He was killed “because the national security state felt it was necessary to kill him because he was a traitor.” Douglass: “Kennedy’s security was withdrawn. He was driven into a trap. He had been set up.” The national security forces in government and corporate world “do not want us to see the connections…to understand that 1963 is right now.”

**From review of Jim Douglass’s Gandhi and the Unspeakable.** Douglass learns that as Gandhi pursued his "redemptive vision of a united, nonviolent India in the nuclear age," he was murdered "by an anti-Muslim, Hindu nationalist group, with the silent complicity of forces in the newborn Indian government" that wanted instead a national security state rooted in nuclear weapons and Hindu fundamentalism. Those forces of violence continue to affect India, Pakistan and the world today.

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Dick Bennett
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