

American Hippos:

The United States Military Establishment in Africa

Since the end of World War II, the United States military has taken an active role in various regions around the world. The Middle-East, Southeast Asia, and Latin America are areas of the world which have become places of interest to the United States military. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan appeared to be winding down in the early 2010s, the United States was publicly pivoting back to Southeast Asia. A statement by President Obama to the Australian Parliament in 2010 that defense budget cuts would not include the U.S. Navy in Southeast Asia seemed to confirm this pivot. However, ten years from now, the conversation may be that this was also when the U.S. began to make a major play in Africa as well. According to some estimates military missions in Africa conducted by the United States have jumped over 200% during the Obama administration, though the Pentagon insists that its only permanent military base is in Djibouti. The African continent has also seen a proliferation of drone warfare over the past several years, which seems to be President Obama's weapon of choice in the so-called War on Terror. We will briefly explore the extent to which the United States military has become involved in the African continent and then explore why it has done so. Also, seeing as this is an election year, I cannot resist commenting on the domestic political ramifications of repeated institutional failure.

Camp Lemonnier is a United States military base located near the Djibouti-Ambouli International Airport. It is home to the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA)

which was established under the auspices of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and is to date the only permanent military base in Africa that the Pentagon will acknowledge. According to one estimate, there are as many as 16 drone missions undertaken each day out of Camp Lemonnier. Most of the missions are related to surveillance, but armed drones are also used in missions in Yemen and Somalia. The United States has also assumed a leading role in helping to train the militaries of the governments in these regions deal with threads from groups like Al-Shabaab without our help; this training has been essential, the government says.¹

Unfortunately, if we look at the effects on the ground of these training missions, there has been significant blowback. In one case the government of Mali was overthrown in the midst of a Tuareg rebellion by a U.S. trained military officer. The coup dealt a significant blow to the Mali's ability to deal with the Tuareg rebellion. In 2014, a similar event occurred in Burkina Faso. In Libya, the United States and its allies bombed the region into chaos and shipped arms to Libyan groups which further destabilized North Africa – especially Mali – as many of these weapons fell into hands of terrorists groups such as Al-Shabaab, ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Further escalation of the violence in the region has in turn created more of a need for security and an increased presence of the U.S. military.

But increased engagement with the region has not produced sufficient results. Much of what the U.S. has done has ended in abysmal failure and left observers scratching their heads. In 2015, the U.S. army made headlines when the Pentagon's failed \$500 million program to train and equip Syrian rebels completely flopped and was cancelled.² Weeks later, the *Times* reported that Michael Nagata, the Army general in charge of the program was leaving his current job in a

¹ "Bamako Hostage Crisis: How U.S.-Backed Intervention in Libya Spread Chaos to Nearby Mali." Democracy Now! November 20, 2015

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>

few weeks but would likely be *promoted* to a senior counterterrorism position in Africa.³ Yes, promoted. The Dispatch reported⁴ that the main reason for Nagata's promotion was his shrewdness in navigating the Pentagon bureaucracy (a la Donald Rumsfeld) and his ability to accrue favors with the necessary people; a forceful personality, in other words. It is difficult to imagine the United States implementing an effective strategy with people like Nagata in command. Other western efforts to train militias to support have faltered, too. A British effort was scrapped due to disciplinary issues which came to a head after five Libyan officers were charged with sex offences (including rape) outside of Cambridge. The Italians saw a little more success. They managed to train 1,500 soldiers, but most of them deserted or joined Libyan militias after they graduated.⁵ The United States could learn from these mistakes, but so far it has not.

The United States has also invested significant resources in the South Sudan, a landlocked country in the northeast of Africa which gained its independence from Sudan in 2011 in no small part due to the policy of the Bush and Obama administrations. Even the New York Times, which carries significant water for Obama administration, opined in an editorial that "South Sudan must rank among the most astounding failures in Africa." *That* is saying something. As the Times points out, the Bush administration, with strong backing from Congress, supported the predominantly Christian southerners against the Muslim northerners, and played a key role in negotiating a peace agreement in 2005 that would eventually lead to

³ Michael Shear. "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS" The New York Times. October 9, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>

⁴ Nick Turse. "Tomgram: Nick Turse, Success, Failure, and the 'Finest Warriors Who Ever Went Into Combat'" October 25, 2015 http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176060/tomgram%3A_nick_turse,_success,_failure,_and_the_%22finest_warriors_who_ever_went_into_combat%22/

⁵ Turse, *Tomorrow's Battlefield*, pg. 103

South Sudanese independence. President Bush had become personally close to President President Salva Kiir and exchanged gifts with him. But billions of dollars of American aid could not stop the ethnic tension from pushing the entire country into civil war. China, of all places, has become a benefactor of this situation. According to Nick Turse the Chinese have enabled, through the U.N., an infantry battalion of their own to be put into South Sudan to guard the oil fields there, which are of course of great interests to the Chinese. In an ironic twist, the United States, because it helps pay for U.N. troops and peacekeepers which operate under U.N. auspices, now pays for Chinese troops to guard Chinese oil interests in South Sudan. This is not an effective foreign policy.⁶

According to Nick Turse, the Chinese have brought money and the potential for more investment with them to stimulate the economies of countries like the South Sudan and leave their mark upon the region. They literally funded and erected the building which houses the African Union. But the Chinese have not emphasized, for instance, labor rights. This is something the United States could do, and should do. The most successful American nation-building experiment, I think, was the occupation of Japan, where workers were granted such rights in the constitution (this is true, the constitution of Japan actually contains a provision for the right to collectively bargain and assemble unions; even the U.S. constitution does not feature this crucial provision; labor unions did not exist in 1791). If the U.S wants to have a positive, lasting impact in these regions, it should emphasize rights like this. Then again, the labor movement is fraction of what it was in the 1940s and I wouldn't expect a nation of young people who are more familiar with *Call of Duty* than the labor movement to clamor for African worker

⁶ South Sudan's Agony. The Editorial Board. The New York Times. June 27, 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/opinion/sunday/south-sudans-agony.html>

rights. However, the U.S. could also fund organizations like CILSS, which we know of from Djime Adoum, and help to address the realities of climate change that will become all too real in a few short years. But these are not military solutions. The military would have to share power with organizations like the State Department which would be better suited to engage with these issues. That will mean the State Department will need more funds, which is unlikely to happen.

All of this begs the question, why? Why does the United States continue to wage such an ineffective foreign policy? Why does the Pentagon promote failed generals to more senior positions? Why, in the words of Donald Trump, do we not win anymore? Part of the answer is that Americans probably trust too much in the military, and the media is not willing to dig deep enough and tell the hard truth about its failures to the American public. A few years ago, Richard Engel, a journalist for NBC news who is frequently embedded with U.S. forces, was captured by what was presumably an Al-Qaeda affiliate organization; years later we would discover that it was actually an organization affiliated with a government that the United States was supporting. NBC never bothered to correct the record for three years until it was caught.⁷ I think this is because if NBC and Richard Engel go too far in questioning the effectiveness of the military, their reporters won't get embedded with troops anymore; Engel won't get the big stories. Furthermore, Americans consume films like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Black Hawk Down*, all of which gave won multiple Academy Awards and whose stories are accepted as The Past in the canon of American historiography. There are these examples, and there are the countless holidays and public relations campaigns (e.g. Veterans Day, Memorial Day, Fleet Week, Pearl Harbor Day, the list goes on) utilized by the military regularly, not to

⁷ Ravi Somaiya. "NBC News Alters Account of Correspondent's Kidnapping in Syria." *The New York Times*. April 15, 2015.

mention blockbuster videogame franchises which frequently consult with the military experts. Not surprisingly, Americans come to view our Special Forces and other elite military organizations as supermen. The media is not able or not willing to dig deep enough and tell the hard truth to the American public. In 1979 and 1980, the U.S. Air Force – which is just one branch of the military, mind you – revealed that its public-information outreach included the following:

- 140 newspapers, 690,000 copies per week
- Airman magazine, monthly circulation 125,000
- 34 radio and 17 TV stations, primarily overseas
- 45,000 headquarters and unit news releases
- 615,000 hometown news releases
- 6,600 interviews with news media
- 3,200 news conferences
- 500 news media orientation flights
- 50 meetings with editorial boards
- 11,000 speeches⁸

In 1970, Senator J. W. Fulbright had found that the air force public-relations effort in 1968 involved 1,305 full-time employees.⁹ There is no reason to believe that the air force public-relations effort has diminished since the 1960s.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, a recent Gallup poll indicates that the military is the most trusted institution in the country, ranking slightly higher than small business.¹¹ As long as the leaders of the military and the Pentagon are not held accountable for

⁸ United States Air Force. "Fact Sheet: The United States Air Force Information Program" (March 1979); "News Releases: 600,000 in a Year," Air Force Times. April 28, 1980.

⁹ J. W. Fulbright. *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*. (New York: H. Liveright, 1970), p. 88.

¹⁰ Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.

¹¹ Confidence in Institutions. Gallup Historical Trends. June, 2015. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

their actions, it is going to continue to be like this. In a democracy, institutions which command such popularity have little incentive to change.

Perhaps it will take someone like a Donald Trump to point out these problems. Trump does not seem to be a man who is constrained by conventional wisdom and might feel emboldened to challenge these assumptions. The United States paying Chinese troops to guard their own oil interests the South Sudan, where we have spent billions which were supposed to align them with us, is excellent fodder for his campaign. Perhaps the only reason we have not heard from him on this issue is that he is not aware of it. When Trump says that we are being led by “stupid, stupid people,” is he wrong? Incompetency and waste produce bad results, and flailing institutions can be easily demagogued by a Donald Trump figure. In the 1950s, Joe McCarthy’s demagoguery was finally pacified after he decided to go after the military. That was too far for Americans in the 1950s. Trump has thus far proven a knack for bucking historical trends. The only way to address the problems that the U.S. military is having in Africa is through more transparency and accountability. If the Pentagon was more accountable to the American public, perhaps it would not waste so much money on ineffective programs as it has for years. In this way, the military-industrial establishment is the hippo in George Ayittey’s “Cheetahs vs. Hippos” analogy: it has been around forever, and it has not been seriously questioned. Perhaps someday, it will be.

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