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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THE EMOTIONAL BASE OF AMERICA'S MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

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The Emotional Base of America's Military-Industrial Complex

> **Peace is the anxious lull when warrior dreams are agitated by techno-visionaries and the industrial ambitions of weapons makers.** – William Greider. Fortress America: The American Military and the Consequences of Peace. Public Affairs, 1998.

> **When we perceive every moment as potentially recurrent and then virtually will it as new, the choices become much more vital: to follow the mimetic path of the war gamer, which is essentially not to choose; or to treat every decision, good or bad, small or large, as inevitably, ethically, and profoundly consequential, as a prelude to what Nietzsche calls 'a great year of becoming'….** – James Der Derian. Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network. Westview Press, February 2001.

As American troops test their latest doctrine and equipment in the streets of Iraq, William Greider and James Der Derian's critiques may seem unpatriotic. (Let's face it, their self-immolating polemics do not represent the best in unbiased social-scientific research.) But particularly during the first war of the 21st century, the key questions posed by each deserve attention. Greider asks if we should continue to subsidize what Eisenhower dubbed the "military-industrial complex," while Der Derian wonders if our relentless pursuit for high-speed and "virtual" battlefield technology has not undermined our capacity for objective thought.

Greider's arguments are chiefly economic. We cannot afford to run the existing inventory of tanks, ships and aircraft – built to fight a now-defunct opponent – even as we replace them with new versions built at a much higher marginal cost. We have an "exaggerated redundancy of killing power" ("at least 10 ways to hit 65 percent of the thousands of expected ground targets in two major regional conflicts," according to the General Accounting Office). The money spent on training for these redundant systems provides few collateral benefits (increasing the employment prospects for "working class" recruits, for example). Industrial restructuring – "nameplate" consolidation, outsourcing, and "lean manufacturing" – has left "an oligopoly of three mammoth corporations" using all of their political and market power to keep their "rent-

free" factories "warm" – at perhaps only one-third capacity. We allow these ailing giants to export, fortifying future adversaries like China. And as stock prices fall, the Pentagon cannot afford to let these companies fail. The "self-licking ice cream cone" that is the Congress of the United States prevents the closure of redundant factories and is satisfied by minor reforms, such as procuring a few items "off the shelf." Meanwhile, our subsidized companies tuck away the flag as they go truly global, squeezing and perhaps provoking international competitors (the dangerous Russians). Economies promised by a "capital-intensive and automated" future form nothing but a pipe dream.

Der Derian's analysis is epistemological. Relying on Nietzsche and the post-modern constructivists rather than Clausewitz, he argues that America has created a mighty military-industrial-media-entertainment network (with the evocative acronym, "MIME-NET") that has replaced discernment with entertainment. On the one hand, the technology of mimetic simulation inures our troops to increasingly devastating forms of violence; on the other hand, the steady diet of video "feeds" from the battlefield stupefies the TV- and computer-gazing public. Der Derian would not be shocked by the latest developments: General "Tommy" Franks traveling to Qatar to win the simulated war before a shot was fired, the "embedding" of reporters in the "battlespace," and the nattering of TV generals (many of whom, Greider might add, have links to industry). The overall effect is the continued glorification of the Westphalian nation-state, building on the cinematic innovations of the Nazi propaganda machine, albeit in a democratic-republican context.

In a sense, Der Derian takes the views of a repentant Michael Vlahos, reported briefly by Greider, to a deeper level. Vlahos fears that the United States may become "the Darth Vader wearing the black helmet…in the same position as empires of the past," warning that "[a]ny

great empire trying to ride herd on the world in an age of major change is in danger." His chief concern is that the Pentagon might not be able to protect its command and control structures once the "Infosphere" reaches its full potential: "If you fire a missile, you don't know where it's really going to go, who you're going to hit." Der Derian, however, frets more about the enemy within, what Paul Virilio calls "dromologue," or the "virtual theater of war" that makes us "treat seriously the plotting of distant threats, the staging of military forces, the character of rogue states" and that "combined with political correctness transforms democracy from an open participatory form of government into a software program for the entertainment and control of all spectators."

On a similar tack, Greider worries that the American elite does not share the same vision of national security as the American public, which is "easily manipulated by propaganda blitzes." The elite few want to add military capacity so that the United States can unilaterally counter threats around the globe. The broader public prefers multilateral action focusing on cleaning up the environment, eliminating weapons of mass destruction ("WMD"), promoting UN peacekeeping, deterring aggression, eliminating international arms transfers, or supporting democracy. According to the polls cited by Greider, the public also believes that the application of military force creates more problems than it solves.

Recent polls suggest otherwise, perhaps because MIME-NET propaganda has caused the public to look at the world differently. The drama begins September 11, 2001. Captured over and over by 24-hour television and radio – even NPR went 24/7 – a somnolent nation awakes to a threatening new world. Flags wave in front of every house, on top of every car and overpass. The national anthem resounds at every public and quasi-public event. New York City and its brave fire fighters and policemen become the poster children for the global war on terrorism.

The military successes in Afghanistan fill an immediate emotional need. Building on what the polls cited by Greider show is latent public support for the use of violence where WMD is concerned, the Administration provides a new *leitmotif*: Iraq. Secretary Powell produces a carefully edited video at a precisely orchestrated moment. The UN fails its test, another choreographed movement. French defiance diverts attention from the hollowness of Anglo-American solidarity. Reporters are told their questions are "silly," and that silliness, in stylized opposition to the sobriety of the Administration, becomes part of the myth. We follow each twist and turn of diplomacy, the dramatic ebb and flow of each decisive battle, on TV. When the price of admission is high – we will be attacked by WMD-wielding fanatics unless we strike back now – the audience seems especially willing to suspend its sense of disbelief. Waves of information and commentary beat against a backdrop of color-coded alerts, compelling firm acquiescence.

And yet left-wing Euro-criticism of the MIME-NET – or whatever one calls this fanciful blend of military-industrialism and "reality TV" – can take on the same qualities as the phenomenon it attacks. The constructivist logic propounded by Der Derian, and even the breathy *aha*-ism of Greider's account, too easily devolve into so much cant.

Der Derian's interviews with senior military figures nonetheless paint a stark picture: Director of the Office of Net Assessment Andrew Marshall ("St. Andrew") telling us about the next "military technical revolution" (anticipated by the Russians in the 1950s!) and how we, like Liddell Hart a century earlier, bask in ignorance while never-obsolescent war lurks around the corner in Asia; Ryan Henry, then-head of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, recalling his "most memorable moment as a pilot" when he crashed during his first simulated (!) night landing on a carrier; Vice Admiral Arthur Cebrowski, then-president of the Naval War College, averring that the revolution in military affairs is "unlike any seen since the Napoleonic

age" and "comparable to the advent of fire," and requiring a "different view of epistemology;" Mike Macedonia, founder of the Institute for Creative Technologies, where Hollywood meets the Pentagon, "Our job is to imagine the worst…to take more technological risks, not risks with people;" and General Wesley (CNN) Clark, "One of our problems is that we take the [National Training Center] experience and we make a sordid virtue out of preparation." Maybe we are going a bit overboard here, endlessly rehearsing and automating war.

Der Derian's account of his meeting with an anonymous Marine snaps the reader back to reality: "Yeah, all this technology around, everyone with their own computers and cameras, they run you here and there—it's all starting to look like *Aliens*." And the reference is not to the video game but to the movie, where the Sigourney Weaver character had to take over from incompetent officers. "Dang right, commander sat in his vehicle, wasn't out with his men, you always need a warrior somewhere, someone not afraid to get dirty." Still, the "revolution" in military affairs promises to eliminate some dirtiness. After all, the advent of precision-guided weaponry is not a completely unwelcome development to those living outside the target radius. And for all we know, the greatest horrors of war still lie far behind us.

I had expected to come across brother Niccolo much earlier in Der Derian's exposition, but we meet him for the first and only time eleven pages from the end of the work: "'Virtual,' from the Latin *virtualis*, conveys a sense of inherent qualities that can exert influence by will, as in the *virtù* of Machiavelli's Prince, or by potential, as in the virtual capacity of the computer." Der Derian goes on to tell us that his nascent "virtual theory" is "nearer to the postmodernists and the constructivists than the rationalists or realists" one that at its core features a "deterritorialized sense of being." He makes a distinction without a difference. The parallel world of illusion

and dissimulation has always existed, molded by the realist few. The public has been and still is a willing mark for the Prince, while the sanctity of territory remains an inherent good.

Despite the fact that patriotism has often been criticized in the Anglo-American world (Johnson's "last refuge of scoundrels," Dryden's "Never was Patriot yet, but was a Fool," Bierce's "combustible rubbish") the public has generally supported its many guises.[1] America's immigrant culture put a flag on ideals like "liberty and justice for all," perhaps in compensation for the lack of a true *patria* to blubber about in the pubs. "It is impossible to conceive a more troublesome or more garrulous patriotism; it wearies even those who are disposed to respect it," de Tocqueville groused into his own frothy brew a half century later. (De Tocqueville also commented: "Religious insanity is very common in the United States.")[2]

In an era of globalization and terrorist attacks against the continental United States, identifying with the "homeland" becomes all the more vital. The sensations produced by viewing any one of a hundred sports channels cannot possibly compete with the genuine, palpitating responses (pro and con) that accompany our nation's virtuous military advance. I may resent the high salaries accruing to a baseball player who hardly breaks a sweat, even as I lamely support the home team, but I can genuinely appreciate the blood, sweat and tears of the active military and reservists seen liberating Iraq on "cable." Politics is the art of harnessing such emotions to policy, and as Greider notes, the laundry list of human aspirations is long.

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[1]Geoffrey Nunberg, "The Last Refuge of Scoundrels and a Noble Virtue," The New York Times, Sunday, April 13, 2003, Section 4 and Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary, <inhttp://www.online-literature.com/bierce/devilsdictionary/16/>.

[2]The first quotation from de Tocqueville is from Nunberg, op. cit; the latter is from Democracy in America, Book II, Chapter 12, in <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/ch2_12.htm>.

Who is more likely to get the job done, the United Nations or these United States? In the emotional atmosphere of post-September 11, only one answer seems politically possible.

Clausewitz reminds us that warfare and politics inhabit the same epistemological space, a realm of competing interests. Der Derian tries to stretch this reality, describing "a constant negotiation of interests, between powerful material interests, to be sure, but also between states of being (*inter-est*), in the sense of virtual and 'real' ways of knowing and living with others who putatively pose a threat to 'our' interests." But how does the public determine its interests except through the medium of symbolic exchange? Perhaps a larger percentage of the franchise than today sat around in pubs debating "objectively" the pros and cons of war in Colonial America, but the choice was nonetheless emotional, to fight or not to fight for that "shining city on a hill." The public did finally opt for war, although it rejected Tom Paine's most radical ideas, which were properly discredited by the elite propaganda machine of the day.

If Der Derian and Greider's criticisms are not unique to this post-post-modern, post-post Cold War era, they may still explain how the structures of our society inhibit our capacity to choose between competing national security strategies. By diverting scarce resources to develop virtual war-fighting technologies for ourselves, as well as stripped down versions for the rest of the world, we are perhaps more likely to use them (guns not people cause violence). Similarly, as the politico-bureaucratic business coalitions built to manage and transform our armed forces solidify, our military and civilian leaders may be more apt to imagine threats and council war. Finally, there is probably something to be said for Paul Virilio's new line of inquiry: "[W]hat happens when information flows outstrip the powers of deliberation, truth is further relativized by velocity, and crises spread like a contagion?"

Operation Iraqi Freedom signals that the U.S. Government is prepared to ride a wave of patriotism to preempt such contagion, using the very structures criticized by Greider and Der Derian to "shock and awe" the world. Thus upturned, the emotional cauldron that spawns anti-American terrorism may spatter and burn on distant stovetops, scalding only a few soldiers and diplomats – and perhaps a few more collateral civilians – the way things were done before the terrorists brought the fight to our shores. The danger is that more and more people around the world will be carried away by their emotions – one corner of Clausewitz's unholy "trinity" – and that Nietzsche's "great year of becoming" will become an even greater year of warring.

The good news is that at some point the public will take stock. For as De Tocqueville also observed, "The inhabitants of the United States talk much of their attachment to their country; but I confess that I do not rely upon that calculating patriotism which is founded upon interest and which a change in the interests may destroy."[3] Ultimately, neither Greider nor Der Derian has proven that Americans have lost this unique ability to calculate their interests, which are tested daily in the marketplace and politically at least once every four years. After all, that is the basis of both our Constitution and our patriotism.

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[3]Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Book I, Chapter 18, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/detoc/1_ch18.htm>.