



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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The United States and Terror on the Tenth Anniversary of 9/11

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11 September 2011 marks ten years since the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC. However, I would also like to call attention to the date, 20 September, which marks ten years since the United States entered its present condition of perpetual war. It was on 20 September 2001 that then U.S. President George W. Bush declared the opening of the "war on terror."



Delivering the "War on Terror" speech to Congress

It was this announcement, not the 9/11 attacks, that radically changed U.S. foreign policy and the nature of U.S. wars. Before 9/11 (non-state) terrorism had been treated as a crime, to be dealt with by police and the courts. By declaring a "war on terror", Bush was announcing that thenceforth it would be dealt with by the military.

To grasp the significance of this, it is useful to recall the difference between what police officers do, and what soldiers do. Police officers are trained to examine evidence and search for suspects. When they have sufficient evidence, they are authorized to make arrests. But they are not authorized to make a final judgment as to a person's guilt: that is for the courts to decide. No matter how convinced they may be of a suspect's guilt (and contrary to what you see in American movies and TV dramas) they may not execute suspects.

In the case of dealing with (non-state) terrorists, this can be a lot of trouble. It takes time to collect evidence and track down suspects, and even having done this, you might not get a guilty verdict. By defining terrorism not as "crime" but as "war", the U.S. seems to have made a great gain in efficiency. Soldiers don't need to, and are not trained to, collect evidence, or search for suspects, or concern themselves with what the enemy soldiers may or may not have done. Under the laws of war, what the enemy soldier may have done is

irrelevant. Once a person is identified as an enemy soldier, even if that person has never fired a gun at anyone, he or she may be killed.

In ordinary war, the enemy soldiers are generally identified by their uniforms (that's why uniforms are stipulated under the international laws of war), but in the case of the "war on terror" alleged enemies do not wear uniforms. Thus the U.S. troops must make judgments based on their general appearance, their body language, etc.

In short, by declaring the "war on terror", the U.S. granted itself the right to kill suspects.

It granted itself the right to make pre-emptive attacks (i.e. to invade) countries with which it is not at war, and to kill or "arrest" these suspects.

And it granted itself the right to imprison the people it has "arrested" without due process, permitting them neither the rights of POWs nor the rights of criminal suspects.

And given that no other country, but only the U.S., claims these rights, the result is that in international law, the principle of equality under the law has been destroyed.

And incidentally, while the Obama Administration tends to avoid the term "war on terror", it has not abandoned the above practices.

By declaring a "war on terror", the U.S. not only changed the laws of war, it also changed the nature of war.

"Terror" is, as has often been pointed out, the name neither of a country nor of an organization nor of an ideology. It is the name of a tactic. How is it possible to make war against a tactic? Or again, once you have launched such a war, how is it possible to bring it to an end? Ordinary wars can be brought to an end by invading the country or the territory controlled by the enemy, gaining control of more and more turf, and finally seizing the enemy's capital or military headquarters. Or alternatively, by negotiating a cease-fire or peace agreement before that happens. But the tactic of terrorism is not confined to any country, limited to any particular territory or monopolized by any organization. There is no individual or group with which the U.S. could negotiate a ceasefire or sign a treaty ending hostilities. And so it continues today, after ten years, with no prospect of coming to an end.

I called this "perpetual war", but perhaps that term is too pessimistic: nothing lasts forever. Maybe "institutionalized" or "routinized" war would be a better term. I visited the U.S. this summer, and found that, as usual, this is not a society "at war." There is no "state of emergency". There is no sense of making special efforts or sacrifices for the war effort (except of course for the families of GIs). The war is hardly ever talked about; if you raise it as a subject, you risk being considered odd. The war is just another aspect of daily life, a part of the routine.

But if there is no strategy for ending the war by traditional methods, won't it end when all the "terrorists" are killed? But as many people have observed, no matter how many "terrorists" are killed, their number does not decrease. The war against terror manufactures the enemies that it fights against. Its violence simultaneously destroys and produces enemies. Thus the "war on terror" is a war against the consequences of the "war on terror", and so is a war on itself. And if you consider that many of the tactics used by the U.S. military – bombing cities, "shock and awe", attacks by unmanned robot planes and assassination teams, etc. – fit well into the definition of the military tactic "terror", the war takes on the aspect of a war against one's own shadow. You project your guilt onto the enemy – that is, you try to hide from yourself the horror of what you are doing by saying it is those other people who are doing it. Then you kill those other people, hoping that your guilt will die with them, but it does not. Rather, the more you kill, the greater the guilt, and the greater the need for more enemies on which to project it.

Thus, no matter from what angle you look at it, the "war on terror, very much like a perpetual motion machine, is so constructed as to go on forever.

Surely, from the standpoint of the war industry, this is the Best of All Possible Wars.

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Recommended citation: C. Douglas Lummis, 'The United States and Terror on the Tenth Anniversary of 9/11,' The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 37 No 4, September 12, 2011.

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