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Review

Another Century of War?

By Gerald Kolko
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Reviewed by Tracy McLellan

May 3, 2004—With the attacks of September 11 says Gabriel Kolko, the war has come to American shores, and will remain there. To avoid future similar catastrophes, the US should become realistic in its ambitions, recognize the limitations of military power, and end the folly of thinking it necessary to micromanage the affairs of other countries. Helpful too he says would be eliminating the breeding grounds of "terrorism" by raising the standard of living of the destitute around the world. The prognosis is not good, as the US continues to pursue in spades policies similar to those that have produced catastrophe.

In a slim, powerfully written volume of flawless prose, Kolko draws together seamlessly the many diverse threads of what he shows to be disastrously misguided continued attempts of the United States to intervene militarily and meddle in the affairs of nations around the globe in a world far more complex than it was even fifty years ago. He covers whole histories of wide and disparate political domains in literally several sentences or paragraphs. His voice is unique in bringing the light of truth and understanding to US foreign affairs and the mess we're in.

Kolko's fundamental thesis, obvious, as it so often is with genius, is that political problems have political and social, not military, solutions. With the notable exceptions of Vietnam and Korea, the US military machine is quite capable of gaining victories in its imperial adventures. Unfortunately, these more often result in concomitant political catastrophe: US "arms have not brought peace to the world even though Communism has virtually disappeared and can no longer explain the behavior of the US and its allies...we now live in an era of growing insecurity that will very probably see more trauma like (September 11) as well as (similar) responses..."

Kolko points out the monstrous irony that the two nemeses the US has most demonized over the last decade, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, it has previously supported with massive military, economic, and diplomatic aid and treated as friends. Because of these and similar Machiavellian intrigues, and despite the fall of the Soviet Union, the world is a far more dangerous place. And what is new, especially for the American people.

The examples of military triumphs that have become political calamity is a long list and continues to grow; and will continue to grow under the militarist policies of the Bush administration. Worse, and far more ominous, is Kolko's analysis of Bush foreign policy as being ad hoc, improvised, opportunist, and confused. He documents flip-flops in Bush policy, which show the conservative ideology to be as malleable as conservatives often lament of the liberal. Kolko is very edifyingly in and out of a complex and lucid history of the petrol- and geo- politics of the Middle East like a cold bath.

The CIA, for example, assassinated the moderate but nationalist Iranian President Mossadegh in 1954 and installed in his stead the extremist Shah. He instituted policies supposedly beneficial to US interests, that is, multinational oil corporations—a military victory. With the Iranian Revolution of 1979, however, the US ushered the Shah into exile, and Khomeini came to power—a political catastrophe. Iran became far more influential in the region in a way supposedly inimical to US interests. In another Machiavellian intrigue, the US supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its war with Iran 1980-88. Indeed the US helped both sides against the other in that war because, as Henry Kissinger so eloquently put it, we hope they both lose. There were millions of casualties in the war, another US military triumph. But when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the US had another major political calamity on its hands, which has festered into today's crisis.

It is often mentioned as proof of Saddam being a thug and a tyrant that he launched chemical attacks on the Kurds. In a case of intentional amnesia, ignored is that the US continued to support him as staunchly after he did so as before. Often noted is that Hussein launched chemical attacks against Iran in the war, but, more amnesia, rarely that he did so with the help of US intelligence and Western corporation-supplied technology for WMD. These are the rule rather than the anomaly in US foreign affairs, and makes Kolko's formulation that political problems have political and social, not military, solutions, all the more urgent.

Turning his attention to Afghanistan, Kolko says despite the idealistic protestations, the US went to war out of revenge and to maintain its military "credibility." Because the US always needs help from other nations in its military adventures (and almost as often makes promises it doesn't keep to get it) the maintaining of this "credibility" now extends beyond the domains of the US itself and its troops, to a wide variety of shifting and changing alliances and coalitions, says Kolko. A political complication which often seeks, in the final analysis, folly and a military solution. While US power, largely unchallenged by a countervailing threat since the demise of the Soviet Union, often guarantees military victory against the Taliban and elsewhere, for example, political catastrophe is much more likely to follow than solution.

In Afghanistan, the US reluctantly supported the Northern Alliance, not a far cry from the Taliban. The military action largely completed, the area now suffers the same neglect which is sure to exacerbate the poverty and political chaos that gave rise to three decades of war. Worse, and Kolko examines this in terse detail, the war in Afghanistan has brought increased destabilization to all of South Asia, and especially to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which ramifications and consequences will be of far more significance to American "interests" and security. Add in the increasing destructiveness of modern weaponry, and their proliferation, and US adventurism and unilateralism, and what do you have? Nostalgia for the simpler and more secure political times of the Cold War.

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