

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

CHALMERS JOHNSON, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004, 389 p.

Chalmers Johnson is amongst the growing number of Americans who see the United States as taking a long-term slide into militarism and imperialism, with dire national and international repercussions both now and to follow. In his words, "... the subject matter of this book is American militarism, its physical presence in the world, the growth of the 'special forces' as a private army of the president, and the secrecy which allows even more militarized and secret institutions to live and thrive" (12). These trends, in turn, are associated with four "sorrows of empire" which form the basis of his concluding chapter. They are the whittling away of constitutional and judicial rights; perpetual war and a growing reliance by smaller nations on weapons of mass destruction; the glorification of war and of "military legions;" the enhanced shredding of truth in the face of propaganda; and ultimately, economic bankruptcy as a result of vast military expenditures. Overall, Johnson describes the book as "...not an optimistic report."

Johnson is the president of the U.S.-based Japan Policy Research Institute. He visited the Japanese island of Okinawa in 1996, and wondered why 38 U.S. military bases were situated there, with the troops and their families living in a relatively luxurious American cultural bubble, having their own shopping malls, clubs and movie theatres. Soon it occurred to him that the island's bases were not unique but rather typical of an estimated 725 American military bases in 2001 situated outside the United States. (The number is likely much larger now.) It was this realisation that motivated him to investigate the complex issues covered in *The Sorrows of Empire*.

Other authors have devoted whole books to some of these issues – the nature of past and contemporary empires, the Iraqi wars, and the fate of globalization which he sees as being devastated by U.S. foreign policy. For this reviewer, what is outstanding about Johnson's analysis, however, is his focus on the "global empire of military bases," their strategic roles and the U.S. companies which construct and service them, as well as undertaking reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whilst all empires build bases in order to control and exploit their colonies, Johnson sees the contemporary bases as a sign of a new militarism, and an adjunct to imperialism, which is quite distinct from the U.S. military's traditional role. (Albeit that role, as in the takeover of the Philippines at the beginning of the last century, has sometimes been brutally used for imperial ends.) The bases, he notes,

rarely exploit their surrounding territory directly, but once established, become an element in global hegemony. They deny territory to rivals, allow access to American companies, provide a rationale for the almost half-million Americans who live on them, create some strategic advantage against possible future threats, or may exist simply through inertia.

For example, whilst the Middle East is widely considered as vital to continued oil supplies, few are aware that the Balkans and Caucasus have become essential to a proposed trans-Balkan pipeline which would pump oil from the Caspian basin via Albania to Europe and the United States. To further this end, a huge U.S. base – Camp Bondsteel – has been erected in Kosovo under one of the costliest contracts in Pentagon history. The camp was built, and is maintained, by the firm of Kellogg Brown & Root, which, according to Johnson, is well known in Texas for its political connections, and is a subsidiary of the Halliburton oil and construction company. Dick Cheney, now Vice-President and past Secretary of Defence, was the one-time CEO of Halliburton. During his tenure, the company advanced from seventy-third to eighteenth in the Pentagon's list of top contractors.

Such private military contractors, linked to influential American politicians, service all the bases in the Persian Gulf and points eastwards. Their deep involvement in the reconstruction project for Iraq has become notorious. A Halliburton subsidiary won a \$2.4 billion no-bid contract for reconstruction from the U.S. army in 2003, and its apparently profligate waste of resources in failing to restore an oil pipeline which would generate gasoline, heating fuel and revenue for the Iraqi people has just now attracted the attention of The New York Times (James Ganz, 25 April 2006). Yet, despite these and a myriad other examples, Johnson claims that the U.S. global military empire "...is as unfamiliar and fantastic to most Americans today as Tibet or Timbuktu were to nineteenth century Europeans" (4).

The rise of current U.S. militarism is seen by Johnson as marked by three broad indicators: first, the emergence of a coterie of professional militarists, not all in uniform, who fill senior levels of the executive branch of government and classify everything they do as secret; second and related, the preponderance of military officers or representatives of the arms industry in high government positions; third, a devotion to policies in which military preparedness becomes the highest priority of the state, and in which the costs of that preparedness drain financial resources from vital civic needs. In other words, defence, homeland security and – if need be – offensive military action to forestall a perceived threat to U.S. interests dominate the agenda. The latter, often surrounded by the propaganda of what Johnson calls "humanitarian imperialism" – military intervention in order to overthrow tyrants and introduce democracy – latches on to a long-term element in American foreign policy which would have been familiar to Woodrow Wilson who repeatedly intervened militarily in Latin America early in the last century in the name of political and economic stability.

For small “I” liberals, it is difficult not to nod constantly in agreement as Johnson excoriates U.S. policies. And this may blind the reader to this book’s one underlying weakness. Johnson relies heavily on media reports and web sites as well as occasional interviews. These sources may be accurate more times than not, but they do allow for the intrusion of conspiracy theories treated as facts. Note, for example, his statement, gleaned primarily from popular news reports, that the Australian Governor General, under American pressure, dismissed Labour Prime Minister Gough Whitlam from office in 1975 (an extraordinary constitutional step) because the latter wanted to close a secret U.S. satellite intelligence base (162-163). I have considerable knowledge of Australia and a number of well-educated Australian friends. Neither they, nor the web sites favourably devoted to Whitlam’s career, mention such a blatant intrusion of the United States into Australian affairs. But, who knows? Johnson could be right.

To conclude on a more positive note, considering that Johnson was writing in 2004, his prescience is remarkable. In line with one of his “four sorrows,” the current confrontation between the Western powers and Iran over nuclear technology is evidence that smaller countries will seek weapons of mass destruction in order to protect themselves from what they see as growing U.S. military threats to their sovereignty in the pursuit of oil supplies. The sense of “permanent warfare” is constantly heightened by the Bush administration’s focus on terrorist alerts, and the pinpointing of “rogue states.” The growing power in the hands of the President’s executive makes it seemingly impervious to charges of incompetence: incompetence which, in the case of the recent criticism by the five retired generals of Donald Rumsfeld’s interference in military affairs in Iraq, is simply shrugged off by Bush as incorrect. The American economy is remarkably strong, but the country’s deficit is huge and growing. Johnson notes that the outcome could be bankruptcy, but that this is less corrosive “than contempt for the government and its department entrusted with national defense” (witness the recent nosedive in Bush’s popularity in the public opinion polls). But the worst sorrow of all is the whittling away of constitutional and judicial rights in the name of security, the arrests without right to hear evidence, the imprisonments without trial, and the debate over the ethics of torture.

In a recently-published mystery novel set in Washington D.C., the defending attorney in a murder trial makes this statement to the jury: “I love this country, but every time we let another constitutional right be trampled upon, every time we look the other way when some wrongful act is committed in the name of homeland security, or national defense, or patriotism, we become a little less American” (William Bernhardt, *Capital Murder*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2006: 323). Johnson would heartily agree but holds out little hope for positive change. Thus his book ends with the warning that “Nemesis, the goddess of retribution and vengeance, the punisher of pride and hubris, waits impatiently for her meeting with us” (312). We in Canada should not be too smug. A special unit has just been established at a prison in this reviewer’s hometown to hold those arrested

on “security certificates” without trial. Read this book and weep for the loss of those legal rights for which past generations fought so hard.

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