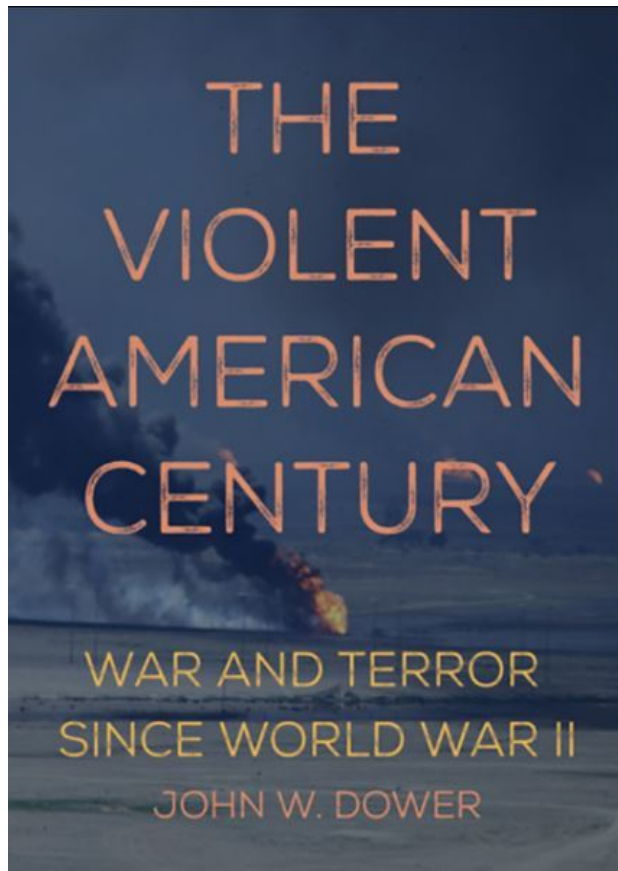


Violence, Okinawa, and the ‘Pax Americana’

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This unannotated essay was written for Okinawan readers of the Ryūkyū Shimpō, where it appeared in translation in four installments on September 25, 27, 29 and October 3, 2017. It has been slightly compressed for readers of the APJ. Dower’s observations are addressed at length in his recent annotated book *The Violent American Century* (Haymarket/Dispatch Books), which will be published in Japanese by Iwanami Shoten in a translation by Yuki Tanaka in November.



In American academic circles, several influential recent books argue that violence

declined significantly during the Cold War, and even more precipitously after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. This reinforces what supporters of US strategic policy including Japan’s conservative leaders always have claimed. Since World War II, they contend, the militarized Pax Americana, including nuclear deterrence, has ensured the decline of global violence.

I see the unfolding of the postwar decades through a darker lens.

No one can say with any certainty how many people were killed in World War II. Apart from the United States, catastrophe and chaos prevailed in almost every country caught in the war. Beyond this, even today criteria for identifying and quantifying war-related deaths vary greatly. Thus, World War II mortality estimates range from an implausible low of 50 million military and civilian fatalities worldwide to as many as 80 million. The Soviet Union, followed by China, suffered by far the greatest number of these deaths.

Only when this slaughter is taken as a baseline does it make sense to argue that the decades since World War II have been relatively non-violent.

The misleading euphemism of a “Cold War” extending from 1945 to 1991 helps reinforce the decline-of-violence argument. These decades were “cold” only to the extent that, unlike World War II, no armed conflict took place pitting the major powers directly against one another. Apart from this, these were years of mayhem and terror of every imaginable sort, including genocides, civil wars, tribal and ethnic conflicts, attempts by major powers to

suppress anti-colonial wars of liberation, and mass deaths deriving from domestic political policies (as in China and the Soviet Union).

In pro-American propaganda, Washington's strategic and diplomatic policies during these turbulent years and continuing to the present day have been devoted to preserving peace, defending freedom and the rule of law, promoting democratic values, and ensuring the security of its friends and allies.

What this benign picture ignores is the grievous harm as well as plain folly of much postwar US policy. This extends to engaging in atrocious war conduct, initiating never-ending arms races, supporting illiberal authoritarian regimes, and contributing to instability and humanitarian crises in many part of the world.

Such destructive behavior was taken to new levels in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon by nineteen Islamist hijackers. America's heavy-handed military response has contributed immeasurably to the proliferation of global terrorist organizations, the destabilization of the Greater Middle East, and a flood of refugees and internally displaced persons unprecedented since World War II.

Afghanistan and Iraq, invaded following September 11, remain shattered and in turmoil. Neighboring countries are wracked with terror and insurrection. In 2016, the last year of Barack Obama's presidency, the US military engaged in bombing and air strikes in no less than seven countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Syria). At the same time, elite US "special forces" conducted largely clandestine operations in an astonishing total of around 140 countries--amounting to almost three-quarters of all the nations in the world.

Overarching all this, like a giant cage, is America's empire of overseas military bases. The historical core of these bases in Germany,

Japan, and South Korea dates back to after World War II and the Korean War (1950-1953), but the cage as a whole spans the globe and is constantly being expanded or contracted. The long-established bases tend to be huge. Newer installations are sometimes small and ephemeral. (The latter are known as "lily pad" facilities, and now exist in around 40 countries.) The total number of US bases presently is around 800.

Okinawa has exemplified important features of this vast militarized domain since its beginnings in 1945. Current plans to relocate US facilities to new sites like Henoko, or to expand to remote islands like Yonaguni, Ishigaki, and Miyako in collaboration with Japanese Self Defense Forces, reflect the constant presence but ever changing contours of the imperium.

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Many years ago, while doing research on Japan after World War II, I encountered the term sangokujin [third-country people] for the first time. What caught me by surprise was not just that this derogatory phrase was directed against Korean and Chinese residents in Japan, but that it also was commonly attached to people from Okinawa.

To some degree, the wanton sacrifice of Okinawa and its populace by the imperial government in 1945 reflected this discriminatory sense of the racial separateness of Okinawa as opposed to the rest of the Japanese population. In a less brutal way, Tokyo's postwar willingness to sacrifice Okinawa to strengthen its position within the Pax Americana reflects the abiding nature of such sangokujin prejudice.

The postwar military exploitation of Okinawa was absolutely critical to both nuclear and non-nuclear US strategy in Asia during the Cold War. This is not just ancient history. In retrospect, it tells us a great deal about the

American way of war in general.

Until the early 1970s, bases in Okinawa were a key component in the nuclear “containment” of Communism in general and China in particular. More proactively, these bases also played an indispensable role in bombing missions undertaken in two devastating “conventional” wars in Asia.

The first of these conflicts was the Korean War, where Chinese troops entered on the North Korean side after US forces appeared to threaten China’s borders. The second great Cold War war, popularly but misleadingly known as the Vietnam War, took place in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), where all-out bombing intensified beginning in 1965 and the United States did not withdraw until 1973.

Neither of these two wars saw US victory. On the contrary, the Korean War ended in a stalemate that continues to the present day (there was never any formal peace treaty ending the conflict). The war in Indochina ended in humiliating US defeat and withdrawal.

These military failures are illuminating. They remind us that with but a few exceptions (most notably the short Gulf War against Iraq in 1991), the postwar US military has never enjoyed the sort of overwhelming victory it experienced in World War II. The “war on terror” that followed September 11 and has dragged on to the present day is not unusual apart from its seemingly endless duration. On the contrary, it conforms to this larger pattern of postwar US military miscalculation and failure.

These failures also tell us a great deal about America’s infatuation with brute force, and the double standards that accompany this. In both wars, victory proved elusive in spite of the fact that the United States unleashed devastation from the air greater than anything ever seen before, short of using nuclear weapons.

This usually comes as a surprise even to people who are knowledgeable about the strategic bombing of Germany and Japan in World War II. The total tonnage of bombs dropped on Korea was four times greater than the tonnage dropped on Japan in the US air raids of 1945, and destroyed most of North Korea’s major cities and thousands of its villages. The tonnage dropped on the three countries of Indochina was forty times greater than the tonnage dropped on Japan. The death tolls in both Korea and Indochina ran into the millions.

Here is where double standards enter the picture.

This routine US targeting of civilian populations between the 1940s and early 1970s amounted to state-sanctioned terror bombing aimed at destroying enemy morale. Although such frank labeling can be found in internal documents, it usually has been taboo in pro-American public commentary. After September 11, in any case, these precedents were thoroughly scrubbed from memory.

“Terror bombing” has been redefined to now mean attacks by “non-state actors” motivated primarily by Islamist fundamentalism. “Civilized” nations and cultures, the story goes, do not engage in such atrocious behavior.

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Looming over the Korean and Indochina wars--and the Cold War in general--was the ever-present possibility that Washington might resort to using nuclear weapons. Here, again, Okinawa played a major role in US planning.

On a number of occasions during the Korean War, top-level US planners recommended atomic weapons. Near the end of 1950, for example, General Douglas MacArthur urged dropping “30 or so atomic bombs... across the neck of Manchuria,” thereby creating a radioactive belt that would deter any land invasion of Korea from the north. A half year

later, MacArthur's replacement as commander General Matthew Ridgway essentially renewed MacArthur's request, this time asking for 38 atomic bombs. Later in 1951 US bombers operating out of Kadena Air Base in Okinawa carried out a mock nuclear raid over North Korea (codenamed Operation Hudson Harbor).

In the so-called Taiwan Straits Crisis in the mid 1950s, which focused on disputed islands located between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, top planners in Washington again considered employing nuclear weapons, this time against China.

Supporters of nuclear deterrence emphasize that, in actual practice, restraint prevailed and these deadly weapons were never used. On the contrary, they helped preserve peace. The now declassified record of these decades, however, presents a much less reassuring picture. Here we see not just rational deliberation, but also extremism and borderline insanity.

In 1956, for example, the US Strategic Air Command (SAC) produced an 800-page study that itemized 1,200 target cities (and 3,400 individual targets) for potential nuclear attack on the Soviet Union and the so-called Soviet bloc, ranging from East Germany to China. Five years later, when Washington and Moscow engaged in an alarming confrontation over the status of Berlin, these projections were updated and an astonishing 127 Chinese cities were listed as potential nuclear targets.

Not only did China have nothing to do with the US-Soviet clash over Berlin, but it did not even test its own first nuclear weapon until 1964. Okinawa would have been the launch site for any nuclear attack on China, as on Korea. We now know that prior to 1972 the United States stored at least nineteen different types of nuclear weapons there. It also stored nuclear bombs minus their fissile cores at various bases elsewhere in Japan.

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Does such early postwar history matter? I think it does.

None of all this--neither the deliberate US bombing of noncombatants, nor the strategic miscalculations of these conventional wars, nor the nuclear brinkmanship that involved Japan in general and Okinawa in particular--deterred Japanese political leaders from endorsing US policy. To the present day, Tokyo dances to the music Washington plays.

At the same time, this history of conventional war and ominous nuclear intimidation helps explain some of the mistrust with which China and North Korea view the United States today. Neither China nor Korea has forgotten the recklessness and peril of these early decades of nuclear terror.

Nuclear weapons were removed from Okinawa after 1972, and the former US and Soviet nuclear arsenals have been substantially reduced since the collapse of the USSR. Nonetheless, today's US and Russian arsenals are still capable of destroying the world many times over, and US nuclear strategy still explicitly targets a considerable range of potential adversaries. (In 2001, under President George W. Bush, these included China, Russia, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Libya.)

Nuclear proliferation has spread to nine nations, and over forty other countries including Japan remain what experts call "nuclear capable states." When Barack Obama became president in 2009, there were high hopes he might lead the way to eliminating nuclear weapons entirely. Instead, before leaving office his administration adopted an alarming policy of "nuclear modernization" that can only stimulate other nuclear nations to follow suit.

There are dynamics at work here that go beyond rational responses to perceived threats. Where the United States is concerned,

obsession with absolute military supremacy is inherent in the DNA of the postwar state. After the Cold War ended, US strategic planners sometimes referred to this as the necessity of maintaining “technological asymmetry.” Beginning in the mid 1990s, the Joint Chiefs of Staff reformulated their mission as maintaining “full spectrum dominance.”

This envisioned domination now extends beyond the traditional domains of land, sea, and air power, the Joint Chiefs emphasized, to include space and cyberspace as well.

Behind such post-Cold War strategizing lies a transformation of modern warfare that traces back to the 1980s, when the Soviet Union was entering its death spiral. The ascendance of personal computers triggered this transformation, and in theory offered the technology whereby the US military would escape future stalemates and debacles like Korea and Indochina. Digitized war made command and control operations more efficient, and simultaneously introduced new arsenals of “smart” or “precision” weapons.

For the US military, the short Gulf War against Iraq in 1991 was a test case for this so-called revolution in military affairs. America’s swift victory--coupled with the dissolution of the Soviet Union that same year--seemed to ensure that the United States had indeed become the world’s incontestable “sole superpower.”

In practice, the Gulf War victory was deceptive and the near absolute faith US policymakers rested in technological “asymmetry” has become a trap. Hubristic faith in America’s high-tech military superiority led Washington to respond to Al Qaeda’s September 2001 terrorist attack by invading Afghanistan and Iraq with blind confidence that resistance would be negligible and both invasions would be short and sweet.

As we now know all too well, this was delusion on a grand scale. The aftermath has been chaos

throughout the Greater Middle East that shows no sign of abating. And responding to this chaos, in turn, has turned America itself into a new sort of hyper warfare state.

This is the world President Donald Trump inherited in January of this year. It is the chaotic militarized world Prime Minister Abe Shinzō wants Japan to take a more active military role in by revising the constitution.

What are we to make of this?

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I number myself among the critics who regard Donald Trump as intellectually, morally, and temperamentally unfit for the presidency. That such a crude, volatile, and unpredictable individual now has the authority to initiate war and even launch nuclear weapons is terrifying to contemplate.

Still, it is misleading to see the new president as an aberration or passing political phenomenon. His conservative and rightwing political base numbers in the scores of millions and extends to the powerful and reactionary Republican Party. Beyond this, his racism and “America First” nationalism coincide with the alarming rise of populist ethno-nationalisms globally. We see this everywhere: in England’s “Brexit” policy; in nations such as Russia, China, India, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and Israel; in the electoral rise of populist rightwing movements in many erstwhile democratic European Union nations; and in localized ethnic and tribal conflicts that savage much of the world today.

The global rise of intolerant fundamentalist religions is a transmuted form of this intensifying wave of group identity and contempt for others. Islamist terrorism is but the most grotesque and conspicuously violent of these faith-driven hate groups.

The most sobering corrective to seeing Trump

as a political actor without precedent, however, is the nature of the American state he has inherited. Ever since September 11, it has become almost a cliché to describe the United States as a gargantuan “national security state” that employs literally millions of individuals in the public and private sectors. War and security have been “privatized” to a degree never seen before.

Hand in hand with this, the paranoia about security that spawned seventeen secret intelligence agencies in Washington has turned America into a massive “surveillance society.” In the process, non-transparency has become more pervasive than ever. Much military-related spending is camouflaged or completely hidden. The massive budget of the Central Intelligence Agency remains secret, for example, even as the agency has expanded into an unprecedented range of war-related activities (including, until exposed to

widespread criticism, torture). The ever mutating empire of bases, together with the ever expanding clandestine operations of special forces, are rarely made public.

If Prime Minister Abe succeeds in revising the constitution and moving the nation into a more “normal” military role, this is the world of war into which Japan will be drawn. There is no possibility that such a Japan will become more independent or autonomous. The country will simply come under pressure to play a more active military role within this ominous new Pax Americana.

In a world where belligerence seems to have surrounded us, it takes great courage and creativity to oppose these trends concretely and responsibly. Many outsiders, among whom I certainly include myself, have long admired the peace-loving voices of Okinawa for giving clear and eloquent focus to this challenge.

John Dower is emeritus professor of history at the Massachusetts institute of Technology. His prize-winning scholarship on Japan and the United States includes *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986) and *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (1999). He was a founder and co-director of the online “Visualizing Cultures” project at MIT visualizingcultures@mit.edu (<https://apjif.org/mailto:visualizingcultures@mit.edu>), which includes over fifty image-driven historical units focusing on Asia—especially Japan and China—in the modern world.