

America's Ongoing Imperial Scam

Biden ends speeches now with “God Bless the Troops,” writes Karen Kwiatkowski. He should respect their sacrifices with a more honorable foreign policy.

By [Karen Kwiatkowski](#)

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One week after the most attention-demanding election of our lifetimes, another Veteran's Day came and went. For the occasion, presumed President-elect Joe Biden [laid a wreath](#) at the Korean War Memorial in Philadelphia; whilst yet-to-conceded incumbent President Donald Trump held a ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery.

Both channeled and invoked the great reverence Americans still hold for veterans of the bygone Second World War and more complicated Korean conflagration. Only [some 300,000](#) of the men, and women, who fought in the former are still living. No doubt we will continue to hear how many succumbed to Covid-19 in the past year, and whose fault that is.

Yet, in his official [statement](#), Biden added a personal touch — his son Beau's service in Iraq — and a “personal commitment:” “I will never treat you or your families with anything less than the honor you deserve.” If he really means it, rebalancing U.S. war-making authority and ditching the dated Second World War analogies would be a good start.

World War II remains the go-to conflict for commemoration almost 80 years after America entered the fray. It marks the last time the U.S. Congress did its constitutional duty and actually declared war before sending America's young men off to kill and die on foreign fields.

All subsequent “wars,” from Korea and Vietnam, to the Iraqs (1991, 2003, 2014), Somalia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and a host of military deployments on every continent around the world were waged at the pleasure of the sitting president, amply funded by the Congress, yet conveniently never rose to the level of a declared war.

Little Wars & Presidencies

We should consider these wars linked to the presidents themselves, or — perhaps more accurately — to their executive staffs, and the Department of Defense. War policy-making power has almost completely shifted from the people's representatives (House and Senate) to unelected appointees often recruited from think tanks — these [funded](#) by an array of organizations interested not in peace, but in accessing tax dollars, and gaining revenues at home and abroad.

Biden's incoming national security team is [chock-full](#) of them. War spending, even in the absence of any notable war, is so compelling that for years, a Congress often [unable to come up](#) with a budget ensured the flow stayed strong to the Pentagon — and its cousin, the CIA — through continuing resolutions.

So-called overseas contingency operations, or little wars, have seen their funding go "[off-book](#)," as the Pentagon budget now covers just its routine expenses — wars are paid for on top of that budget, so long as the Congress can be convinced by their Pentagon liaisons. And they nearly always are.

This obscene spending for military weapons, training, gifts to allies, technology enhancement — for everything from cyberwar, surveillance, data collection, AI, robotics — as well as for standard "pocketbook" weapons systems like the F-35 fighter and aircraft carriers, represent the Military Industrial Complex's (MIC) mainstay.

Consider a disturbingly accurate recent [diagnosis](#) of the current situation:

"...the U.S. Presidents and their aides are quite aware of the current state of the US military: it is a military which simply cannot win even simple conflicts...a military whose Air Force spent absolutely obscene amounts of money to create a [supposedly 5th generation fighter](#) which in many ways is inferior to US 4th generation aircraft!"

It is against this larded and incompetent backdrop — of economic dependencies for a war machine directed by men and women who've never fought a declared war, and scant understanding of what defending the nation ought look like — that Americans await an inbound president who now feels obliged to add the patriotic tick "[May God protect our troops](#)" at the tail end of speeches.

Empty Gestures

Veterans, Memorial, Independence, or even just Tuesdays — replete with military flyovers at football games amidst an age of pandemic — have become empty gestures. VA hospitals across the country had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the 21st century, and it is there today that many of our Vietnam veterans — of another little war mainly designed to entertain Pentagon fantasies at their expense — rot, for lack of a better word.

Ultimately, these sacrifices, all part of a larger Washingtonian game, hardly matter to anyone but Vietnam alumni's wives, kids — and this generation's numbers now also dwindle.

What purpose then, does obligatory national celebration — in prose or pageantry — of veterans actually serve in year 20 of intractable and hopeless wars? Clearly, veterans and their families are the only ones who truly sacrificed anything. Those negotiating massive defense contracts — including built-in clauses covering delays, flaws, and implicit corruption — won't even sacrifice surplus profits for the good of the country.

Money isn't blood, and stock prices can't compensate limbs (to the [tune](#) of 1,645 single or multiple amputee veterans between 9/11 and 2015).

The war machine is largely about money (for select elites) and creating new and expanding markets (benefitting the same) — the modern veteran's primary function is simply that of "patriotic" bait for the public. In fact, trotting out idealized veterans rationalizes and justifies MIC-corruption — trading on the good will that most Americans have for those who served (even if the government they served was lying about why) is increasingly unworkable.

Military recruitment has long been a challenge, partly because Americans increasingly see through the systemic scam, and are left wondering whether it's such a great deal after all. Despite the Pentagon's massive data collection efforts and widespread access to high school and college students, recruitment is becoming more and more difficult.

The latest army and air force recruiting [approach](#) involves convincing economically-insecure parents to encourage their kids to get out of their basements, and pursue dreams of playing soldier in the woods or flying video game-like drones. In an era where more young people live at home for longer, this approach may appeal to parents, but it's also a tell.

Despite repeated and routine public deference to veterans, the truth is out. There are just too many truth bombs available from potential recruits' family and friends; too much outrage at the increasingly exposed police militarization in America's streets — many of their new hires practicing what they learned patrolling Baghdad or Kandahar, policing Baltimore and Kansas City.

There's scant solace in knowing top defense contractors rake in untold billions, whilst too many American families slip further through the cracks, unsure of whence their next thousand will come. And here's a truth uncomfortable for far too many privileged and polite liberals so ready for a quiet return to a Biden-induced normalcy: both Trumpism and left-leaning progressivism was partly fueled by that shared realization.

Our veterans, too, have a solid sense of this truth — a truth that's often painful, embarrassing and sometimes shameful. The Pentagon has little intrinsic interest in helping veterans, except to the extent that veterans, individually or collectively, can both execute and justify profitable business-as-usual foreign policies — which are increasingly crass, contradictory, and unconstitutional affairs.

To truly honor our troops and veterans, Biden's bunch should be brutally honest about what Washingtonian "war" is, and should respect the very real sacrifices of the "other 1 percent" who actually serve—by demanding a more honorable and restrained foreign policy. That's going to require more action than obligatory utterance, and admission of a final hard truth:

The imperial scam we've kept calling a republic these past 70 years is collapsing, and it will take all of us — veteran and civilian alike — to ensure a soft landing.

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Karen Kwiatkowski, Ph.D, is a farmer, teacher, and retired USAF lieutenant colonel, who spent years working in the Pentagon. She was a notable critic and whistleblower in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq invasion. Karen was featured in the acclaimed documentary, "Why We Fight" (2005), writes regularly for Lewrockwell.com, and has had her work published in Salon, The American Conservative, and the Huffington Post, among others. She is a senior fellow at the Eisenhower Media Network (EMN), an organization of independent veteran military and national security experts.

Featured image: On Memorial Day, Joe Biden, accompanied by his wife Jill Biden, at Veterans Memorial Park, Wilmington, Delaware, May 25, 2020. (Adam Schultz, Biden for President, Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

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