

War, Budgets and Blind Ambition

The Limited Minds of the American Elite

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The American elite's unbounded, unquestioned, indeed unconscious sense of imperial entitlement and dominance — based ultimately on war, the threat of war and the profit from war — is one of the defining characteristics of our age. And if you would like to see a glaring example of this attitude in action, look no further than the front page of Tuesday's New York Times, where one David Sanger gives us his penetrating "news analysis" of the Administration's just-announced \$3.8 trillion budget.

Sanger focuses on the huge, continuing deficits that the budget forecasts over the next decade. Completely ignoring the plain truth that his own expert source tell him later in the story — that "forecasts 10 years out have no credibility" — Sanger boldly plunges forward to tell us just what it all means. You will not be surprised to hear that the upshot of these big deficits is that neither Obama nor his successors will be able to spend any money on "new domestic initiatives" for years to come. But let's let Sanger, savant and seer, tell it in his own words:

"In a federal budget filled with mind-boggling statistics, two numbers stand out as particularly stunning, for the way they may change American politics and American power.

"The first is the projected deficit in the coming year, nearly 11 percent of the country's entire economic output. That is not unprecedented: During the Civil War, World War I and World War II, the United States ran soaring deficits, but usually with the expectation that they would come back down once peace was restored and war spending abated.

"But the second number, buried deeper in the budget's projections, is the one that really commands attention: By President Obama's own optimistic projections, American deficits will not return to what are widely considered sustainable levels over the next 10 years. ...

"For Mr. Obama and his successors, the effect of those projections is clear: Unless miraculous growth, or miraculous political compromises, creates some unforeseen change over the next decade, there is virtually no room for new domestic initiatives for Mr. Obama or his successors. Beyond that lies the possibility that the United States could begin to suffer the same disease that has afflicted Japan over the past decade. As debt grew more rapidly than income, that country's influence around the world eroded."

What is most interesting here, of course, is not Sanger's noodle-scratching over imaginary numbers projected into an unknowable future, but his total and apparently completely unconscious adoption of the mindset of militarist empire. For as he puzzles and puzzles till

his puzzler is sore on how in God's name the United States can possibly find any money at all to spend on bettering the lives of its citizens over the next 10 years, it becomes clear that Sanger — like the rest of our political and media elite — literally cannot conceive of an end to empire. Our elites and their courtiers literally cannot imagine life without a permanent war for global dominance, fueled by a gargantuan war machine spread across hundreds and hundreds of bases implanted in more than 100 countries.

And so this consideration, this possible outcome, does not figure in Sanger's "analysis" because it cannot: it lies far outside the scope of his consciousness. The only possible alternative he can conceive to the empire's bloody and bankrupting business as usual is some kind of divine intervention, "miraculous growth" or some "miraculous political compromise."

And make no mistake: the "miraculous political compromise" he is talking about has nothing to do with ending or even trimming the empire. A "compromise" on this issue could only be posited if there was some present conflict over it. But both parties are deeply committed to increasing spending on the wars and the war machine.

No, by "compromise" Sanger means some sort of "Grand Bargain" between the parties to cut Social Security and Medicare, along the lines of the "blue-ribbon panel" of entitlement cutters now being pushed by the Obama Administration. The first effort to impose this elitist, unaccountable commission failed in the Senate a few weeks ago — although the Republicans have proposed such panels before, they didn't like this one because Obama proposed it — but the idea will keep coming back, and Sanger and the elite will doubtless get their "miracle" of slashing the remaining bits of the safety net to shreds in due time.

These are the only possibilities for deficit-cutting that Sanger can even remotely contemplate: some whiz-bang new gizmo — or maybe some hot new "financial instruments" cooked up by Wall Street — that will goose the economy with a bright new bubble ... or else finally telling our old, sick, vulnerable and unfortunate to just crawl off and die already. That's it. That's all that our elite can envision.

Yet the ending of the imperial wars and the dismantling of America's global military empire — and its global gulag — would save trillions of dollars in the coming years. Not only from direct military spending, but also from the vastly reduced need for "Homeland security" funding in a world where the United States was no longer invading foreign lands, killing their people, supporting their tyrants — and inciting revenge and resistance.

This would release a flood of money for any number of "new domestic initiatives," while also giving scope for deep tax cuts across the board. Working people would thrive, the poor, the sick and the vulnerable would be bettered, businesses would grow, opportunity would expand, the care and education of our children would be greatly enhanced, our infrastructure could be repaired and strengthened, our environment better cleansed and cared for. In short, people could keep more of their own money while government spending could be directed toward improving the quality of life of all the nation's citizens.

This is no utopian vision. Many problems, much suffering would remain. But it would be a better society — more humane, more just, more secure, more peaceful, more prosperous than it is now. Such an alternative is entirely achievable, by ordinary humans; it would require no divine miracles, no god-like heroes to bring it about.

But such a society is precisely what our elites cannot — or, to be more accurate, will not — imagine. Because, yes, it would “erode” their “influence” around the world to some extent. Although they would still be comfortable, coddled and privileged, they could no longer merge their individual psyches with the larger entity of a globe-spanning, death-dealing empire — a connection which, although itself a projection of their own brains, gives them a forever-inflated sense of worth and importance.

And on a more prosaic level, the end of empire would mean an end to the horrendous economic distortion wrought by our war-profiteering industries. Other businesses would inevitably come to the fore, economic activity would be spread more evenly across more sectors. And so, yes, those who have feasted so gluttonously for so long on blood money would not be quite as rich as they are now.

A better world — not perfect, by no means perfect, but much better — is entirely possible. We could easily dismantle the empire — carefully, safely, with deliberation — over the next ten years. It is a reasonable, moderate, serious option. It would not require violent revolution, or vast social upheaval. But our elites do not want this. They can no longer fathom life without the exercise — and worship — of power that empire entails. They will not accept — or even contemplate — any alternative to it.

And thus every option and policy we are offered — whether from right-wing Republicans or “progressive” Democrats, or from “serious” news analysts on “serious” papers — must fall within these pathetically cramped, constricted mental horizons. Empire — the imposition of dominion by violence and threat of violence, and the financial and moral corruption this breeds, the example it sets at every level of society — is the canker in the body politic. Until it is dealt with, there will be no healing, no hope, no change — just more degradation and disaster all down the line.

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