

The United States: A Nation on Suicide Watch

by John Stanton

“The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan required major shifts in national resources from civilian to military purposes and contributed to the growth of the budget deficit and public debt. Through FY 2018, the direct costs of the wars will have totaled more than \$1.9 trillion, according to US Government figures. Pollution is a serious issue. The United States (US) is a “large emitter of carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels; deals with water pollution from runoff of pesticides and fertilizers; has limited natural freshwater resources in much of the western part of the country that require careful management. Deforestation; mining; desertification; species conservation; and invasive species (the Hawaiian Islands are particularly vulnerable) are widespread. Long-term problems for the US include stagnation of wages for lower-income families, inadequate investment in deteriorating infrastructure, rapidly rising medical and pension costs of an aging population, energy shortages, and sizable current account and budget deficits.”

“The onrush of technology has been a driving factor in the gradual development of a “two-tier” labor market in which those at the bottom lack the education and the professional/technical skills of those at the top and, more and more, fail to get comparable pay raises, health insurance coverage, and other benefits. But the globalization of trade, and especially the rise of low-wage producers such as China, has put additional downward pressure on wages and upward pressure on the return to capital. Since 1975, practically all the gains in household income have gone to the top 20% of households. Since 1996, dividends and capital gains have grown faster than wages or any other category of after-tax income...In December 2017, Congress passed and President Donald TRUMP signed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which, among its various provisions, reduces the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21%; lowers the individual tax rate for those with the highest incomes from 39.6% to 37%, and by lesser percentages for those at lower income levels...The new taxes took effect on 1 January 2018; the tax cut for corporations are permanent, but those for individuals are scheduled to expire after 2025. The Joint Committee on Taxation (JCT) under the Congressional Budget Office estimates that the new law will reduce tax revenues and increase the federal deficit by about \$1.45 trillion over the 2018-2027 period.”

Are those the words of some left wing liberal publication or fake news from the mainstream media or conspiracy tinfoil hats? No, they are excerpts from the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) 2019 World Factbook, an unflinching look at all the planet’s nations and their political systems, military expenditures, resources and internal and transnational troubles.

We're Number One! We're Number One!

Yes, indeed, the US has real problems, not imagined, as Republicans, Democrats and those with “Star Spangled Eyes” like to claim otherwise. “The US is the greatest country in history with the world’s most powerful military. God Bless America!” they shout out or proclaim after every speech.

Perhaps at one point in history’s past the nation had a shot to be the greatest of all time, at least in this solar system. Maybe that could have come after WW II, or the end of the Vietnam War, or even the largely successful Civil Rights movement. But now the country and its people are delusional in thinking that “everything’s groovy”.

What’s to worry about? Gas prices are low, the National Football League season is underway and the Major League Baseball playoffs are just around the corner. What fun to watch these sporting events as military aircraft fly overhead and 20-something millionaires run around the baseball diamond or up and down the football field in stadiums, by the way, largely financed by the public. Who cares about lead infused water in Newark, New Jersey; Flint and Detroit, Michigan; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania?

And what can be said about the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Where’s the victory to put in the US “Win” column? The American public has largely forgotten these tragic conflicts save those whose families have made a sacrifice. But sacrifice for what? Testing out new equipment, technology and war fighting doctrine? The *War on Terror* has siphoned off cash badly needed for US infrastructure repairs and has taken the lives of thousands of Americans.

Yes, it is correct that there has been no repeat of the 911 attacks, but the US is dealing with its own home grown terrorist problem: active shooters. Is the US military going to start hunting them down here like they do Islamic State terrorists in the Middle East and Africa?

Hell on Earth

At any rate, the only maniacs who want US personnel to remain in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, three hell-holes created, in part, by the US, are zealous military leaders, defense contractors/suppliers, corrupt officials the US has propped up in the three countries, and black market operators eager to steal American weapons and sell them to the Taliban or groups like the Islamic State.

Oh, and let’s not forget that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (the Baron Harkonenn of the US government) and his boss President Donald Trump who are eager for war with Iran (which borders Iraq and Afghanistan, among other nations). That push has already started with the US exiting from the nuclear accord with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) in May 2018. The Trump administration has since unleashed punishing

economic sanctions, and has adopted a blind-support policy for Israel and the bloodthirsty Saudis who would like nothing better than to have the US go to war with Iran. Yes, lets “do Iran” if not by direct military action then through subterfuge and dicey intelligence likely to be used to justify an ill-advised invasion.

The attack-Iran crowd has been singing the same old tune for at least 40 years now and it should have long ago been dust-binned. But here we are, again, moving toward the precipice of conflict.

“According to the National Iranian American Council, “The past 40 years in U.S.-Iran relations have been riddled with missed opportunities. While the Iranians and Clinton administration failed to initiate serious dialogue after Mohammad Khatami’s election, the George W. Bush administration pocketed Tehran’s assistance after the U.S.invasion of Afghanistan, put the country in its “axis of evil,” and ignored its offer for a grand bargain. Under the Trump administration, however, we are likely witnessing the greatest missed opportunity in four decades: a failure to capitalize on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, aka the Iran nuclear deal.”

War planners in the US have already sorted through all the airstrike contingencies and have plans, classified of course, for air/missile strikes. But you need not wait for the day when the aircraft and missiles take to the skies over Iran and the talking heads from left, right and center media rant and rave about a brand new war, or retired generals show up to blather about this and that weapon system. Prepare yourself now. Be an educated armchair warrior by reviewing Anthony Cordesman’s “*Options in Dealing with Iran’s Nuclear Program*.” It addresses the use of conventional and nuclear weapons by the US and Israel.

What’s the Frequency Kenneth?

It is commonplace for Americans to lionize US military leaders and look to them as calming voices, counterweights to warmongering government officials and their advisors. Ironic, isn’t it? Can we look to our divine US military leaders to change the current thinking of the war hawks in the administration, congress and the think tanks that dot the Washington, DC Metro region?

Nope.

Consider this review by William Bacevich, a decorated combat veteran, of the newest US Central Command boss, Marine Corps General Kenneth McKenzie. McKenzie’s area of responsibility (AOR) includes Iran.

“General Kenneth McKenzie became the twenty-fourth commander of CENTCOM (more formally known as United States Central Command). On May 8, at an event sponsored by the Institute for the Perpetuation of War and the Promotion of Regime Change, more formally known as the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), he outlined his plans for building on the legacy of his 23 predecessors. None of

those predecessors, it should be acknowledged, succeeded in accomplishing his assigned mission. Nor, I'm willing to bet, will he.

The essence of that mission, according to General McKenzie himself, is to promote stability. "A stable Middle East underpins a stable world," he announced, and "our steady commitment to our allies and partners provides a force for stability." As to how the region became unstable in the first place, he offers no opinion, leaving listeners with the impression that previous exertions by CENTCOM forces in invading, occupying, bombing, and otherwise spilling blood throughout his Area of Responsibility (AOR) had nothing to do with the absence of stability existing there today... This much seems clear: To listen to McKenzie, Iran is the ultimate source of all evil. To cite just one example, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the general charges that "at least 600 US personnel deaths in Iraq were the result of Iran-backed militants." This was indeed nefarious, and one is hard-pressed to think of a comparable episode in recent military history, although US support for Saddam Hussein pursuant to his war of aggression against Iran might fill the bill."

Don't Bogart that Joint My Friend

How are we faring in that other Long War, the *War on Drugs*?

The Office of National Drug Control and Policy's (ONDCP) 2019 National Drug Control Strategy document describes the massive US local, state, and federal machinery set up to defeat drug trafficking organizations from getting their products to US streets and into the bodies of American citizens.

"The High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) Program provides assistance to law enforcement agencies operating in areas determined to be critical drug-trafficking regions of the United States. HIDTAs provide an umbrella to coordinate Federal, state, local, and tribal drug law enforcement agencies' investigations, and act as neutral centers to manage, de-conflict, analyze, provide intelligence, and execute drug enforcement activities in their respective regions. With the recent inclusion of Alaska, the first new HIDTA in 17 years, the 29 regional HIDTAs now include designated areas in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia. The regional HIDTAs bring together more than 21,000 Federal, state, local, and tribal personnel from 500 agencies through 800 enforcement, intelligence, and training initiatives, all designed to disrupt illicit drug trafficking and dismantle criminal and drug trafficking organizations."

The US military, of course, plays a key role in the US *War on Drugs*, supporting HIDTA's among other activities. Take, for example, US Southern Command's (SOUTHCOM) role in the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South). A 2005 briefing by former US Coast Rear Admiral Jeffrey Hathaway shows that no less than 14 agencies worked, and likely still do, chasing down illicit drugs in the SOUTHCOM AOR. These include the National Security Agency; the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines; the US Coast Guard, and the National Reconnaissance Office, among others. According to one of

Hathaway's slides, every step involved in JIATF-South operations from interdiction to prosecution leads to intelligence. That is an interesting point. So 14 years later and all the intelligence collected has led to what, exactly?

Let's revisit the CIA's 2019 World Factbook for a read on how the *War on Drugs* effort is going. The US is the "world's largest consumer of cocaine (shipped from Colombia through Mexico and the Caribbean), Colombian heroin, and Mexican heroin and marijuana; a major consumer of ecstasy and Mexican methamphetamine; a minor consumer of high-quality Southeast Asian heroin; an illicit producer of cannabis, marijuana, depressants, stimulants, hallucinogens, and methamphetamine. It is also a money-laundering center."

Great!

This piece could go on and on citing data from a myriad of sources showing, among other things, the 500% growth rate of the US prison population, income inequality according to the Gini Coefficient which sees the US (41.5) right near Iran (40), or that one in six children in the US live in hunger. But, hey! The stock market is up, unemployment is down, and the dollar menu at McDonald's is fabulous.

The forever wars on Drugs and Terror, or the trumped up wars to come; income equality; homelessness; hunger, infrastructure collapse and the fracturing of US society into tribes is clearly a nationwide social, political and cultural sickness: perhaps mental illness. Even the Internet/World Wide Web, once viewed as a global unifying/liberating force for change/good has become what is termed the Splinternet, reflecting large in-group fanaticism, censorship and a polarization of political beliefs. It is now polluted with advertisements just as radio and television are.

But there's still time left on the clock to change the direction of the country. Who or what will do that and when it will happen I'm not sure. But I take heart in Robert F. Kennedy's insight below that there are many who long to make "life worthwhile" for everyone in America, once again.

"For Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product...if we should judge the United States of America by that—counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead, and armored cars for police who fight riots in our streets. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.

Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our

public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it tells us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.”

John Stanton is a Virginia based writer. Reach him at jstantonarchangel@gmail.com