



The US Military Empire at Home and Abroad

Chalmers Johnson, Tom Engelhardt

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Tom Engelhardt talks with Chalmers Johnson

As he and his wife Sheila drive me through downtown San Diego in the glare of mid-day, he suddenly exclaims, "Look at that structure!" I glance over and just across the blue expanse of the harbor is an enormous aircraft carrier. "It's the *U.S.S. Ronald Reagan*," he says, "the newest carrier in the fleet. It's a floating Chernobyl and it sits a proverbial six inches off the bottom with two huge atomic reactors. You make a wrong move and there goes the country's seventh largest city."

Soon, we're heading toward their home just up the coast in one of those fabled highway traffic jams that every description of Southern California must include. "We feel we're far enough north," he adds in the kind of amused tone that makes his company both alarming and thoroughly entertaining, "so we could see the glow, get the cat, pack up, and head for Quartzsite, Arizona."

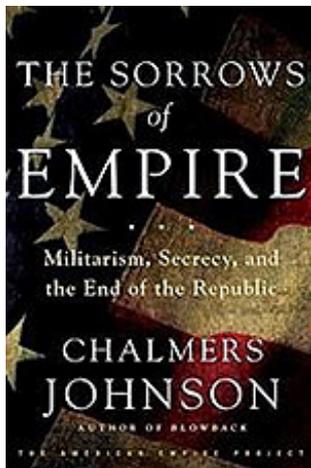
Chalmers Johnson, who served in the U.S. Navy and now is a historian of American militarism, lives cheek by jowl with his former service. San Diego is the headquarters of the 11th Naval District. "It's wall to wall military bases right up the coast," he comments. "By the way, this summer the Pentagon's planning the largest naval concentration in the Pacific in the post-World War II period! Four aircraft-carrier task forces -- two from the Atlantic and that's almost unprecedented -- doing military exercises off the coast of China."



That afternoon, we seat ourselves at his dining room table. He's seventy-four years old, crippled by rheumatoid arthritis and bad knees. He walks with a cane, but his is one of the priest minds in town.

Johnson, who served as a lieutenant (jg) in the Navy in the early 1950s and from 1967-1973 was a consultant for the CIA, ran the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley for years. He defended the Vietnam War ("In that I was distinctly a man of my times..."), but is probably the only person of his generation to have written, in the years since, anything like this passage from the introduction to his book *Blowback*: "The problem was that I knew too much about the international Communist movement and not enough about the United States government and its Department of Defense... In retrospect, I wish I had stood with the antiwar protest movement. For all its naiveté and unruliness, it was right and American policy wrong."

Retired, after a long, provocative career as a Japan specialist, he is the author of the prophetic [Blowback, The Costs and Consequences of American Empire](#), published in 2000 to little attention. After 9/11, it became a bestseller, putting the word "blowback," a CIA term for retaliation for U.S. covert actions, into common usage. He has since written [The Sorrows of Empire, Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic](#). He is just now completing the final volume of his *Blowback Trilogy*. It will be entitled *Nemesis*.



Tomdispatch: Let's start with a telltale moment in your life, the moment when the Cold War ended. What did it mean to you?

Chalmers Johnson: I was a cold warrior. There's no doubt about that. I believed the Soviet Union was a genuine menace. I still think so.

There's no doubt that, in some ways, the Soviet Union inspired a degree of idealism. There are grown men I admire who can't but stand up if they hear the *Internationale* being played, even though they split with the Communists ages ago because of the NKVD and the gulag. I thought we needed to protect ourselves from the Soviets.

As I saw it, the only justification for our monster military apparatus, its size, the amounts spent on it, the growth of the Military-Industrial Complex that [Eisenhower](#) identified for us, was the existence of the Soviet Union and its determination to match us. The fact that the Soviet Union was global, that it was extremely powerful, mattered, but none of us fully anticipated its weaknesses. I had been there in 1978 at the height of Brezhnev's power. You certainly had a sense then that no consumer economy was present. My colleagues at the Institute for the USA and Canada were full of: Oh my god, I found a bottle of good Georgian white wine, or the Cubans have something good in, let's go over to their bar; but if you went down to the store, all you could buy was vodka.

It was a fairly rough kind of world, but some things they did very, very well. We talk about missile defense for this country. To this day, there's only one nation with a weapon that could penetrate any missile defense we put up -- and that's Russia. And we still can't possibly match the one they have, the Topol-M, also known as the SS-27. When Reagan said he was going to build a Star Wars, these very smart Soviet weapon-makers said: We're going to stop it. And they did.

As Daniel Moynihan said: Who needs a CIA that couldn't tell the Soviet Union was falling apart in the 1980s, a \$32 billion intelligence agency that could not figure out their economy was in such awful shape they were going to come apart as a result of their war in Afghanistan and a few other things.

In 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev makes a decision. They could have stopped the Germans from tearing down the Berlin Wall, but for the future of Russia he decided he'd rather have friendly relations with Germany and France than with those miserable satellites Stalin had created in East Europe. So he just watches them tear it down and, at once, the whole Soviet empire starts to unravel. It's the same sort of thing that might happen to us if we ever stood by and watched the Okinawans kick us out of Okinawa. I think our empire might unravel in a way you could never stop once it started.

The Soviet Union imploded. I thought: What an incredible vindication for the United States. Now it's over, and the time has come for a real victory dividend, a genuine peace dividend. The question was: Would the U.S. behave as it had in the past when big wars came to an end? We disarmed so rapidly after World War II. Granted, in 1947 we started to rearm very rapidly, but by then our military was farcical. In 1989, what startled me almost more than the Wall coming down was this: As the entire justification for the Military-Industrial Complex, for the Pentagon apparatus, for the fleets around the world, for all our bases came to an end, the United States instantly -- pure knee-jerk reaction -- began to seek an alternative enemy. Our leaders simply could not contemplate dismantling the apparatus of the Cold War.

That was, I thought, shocking. I was no less shocked that the American public seemed indifferent. And what things they did do were disastrous. George Bush, the father, was President. He instantaneously declared that he was no longer interested in Afghanistan. It's over. What a huge cost we've paid for that, for creating the largest clandestine operation we ever had and then just walking away, so that any Afghan we recruited in the 1980s in the fight against the Soviet Union instantaneously came to see us as the enemy -- and started paying us back. The biggest blowback of the lot was, of course, 9/11, but there were plenty of them before then.

I was flabbergasted and felt the need to understand what had happened. The chief question that came to mind almost at once, as soon as it was clear that our part of the Cold War was going to be perpetuated -- the same structure, the same military Keynesianism, an economy based largely on the building of weapons -- was: Did this suggest that the Cold War was, in fact, a cover for something else; that something else being an American empire intentionally created during World War II as the successor to the British Empire?

Now that led me to say: Yes, the Cold War was not the clear-cut conflict between totalitarian and democratic values that we had claimed it to be. You can make something of a claim for that in Western Europe at certain points in the 1950s, but once you bring it into the global context, once you include China and our two East Asian wars, Korea and Vietnam, the whole thing breaks down badly and this caused me to realize that I had some rethinking to do.

A personal experience five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union also set me rethinking international relations in a more basic way. I was invited to Okinawa by its governor in the wake of a very serious incident. On September 4, 1995, two Marines and a sailor raped a 12-year old girl. It produced the biggest outpouring of anti-Americanism in our key ally, Japan, since the Security Treaty was signed [in 1960].

I had never been to Okinawa before, even though I had spent most of my life studying Japan. I was flabbergasted by the 32 American military bases I found on an island smaller than Kauai in the Hawaiian Islands and the enormous pressures it put on the population there. My first reaction as a good Cold Warrior was: Okinawa must be exceptional. It's off the beaten track. The American press doesn't cover it. It's a military

colony. Our military has been there since the battle of Okinawa in 1945. It had all the smell of the Raj about it. But I assumed that this was just an unfortunate, if revealing, pimple on the side of our huge apparatus. As I began to study it, though, I discovered that Okinawa was not exceptional. It was the norm. It was what you find in all of the American military enclaves around the world.

TD: The way we garrison the planet has been essential to your rethinking of the American position in the world. Your chapters on Pentagon basing policy were the heart of your last book, [The Sorrows of Empire](#). Didn't you find it strange that, whether reviewers liked the book or not, none of them seemed to deal with your take on our actual bases? What do you make of that?

Johnson: I don't know why that is. I don't know why Americans take for granted, for instance, that huge American military reservations in the United States are natural ways to organize things. There's nothing slightly natural about them. They're artificial and expensive. One of the most interesting ceremonies of recent times is the brouhaha over announced base closings. After all, it's perfectly logical for the Department of Defense to shut down redundant facilities, but you wouldn't think so from all the fuss.

I'm always amazed by the way we kid ourselves about the influence of the Military-Industrial Complex in our society. We use euphemisms like supply-side economics or the Laffer Curve. We never say: We're artificially making work. If the WPA [Works Progress Administration of the Great Depression] was often called a dig-holes-and-fill-em-up-again project, now we're making things that blow up and we sell them to people. Our weapons aren't particularly good, not compared to those of the great weapons makers around the world. It's just that we can make a lot of them very rapidly.

TD: As a professional editor, I would say that when we look at the world, we have a remarkable ability to edit it.

Johnson: Absolutely. We edit parts of it out. I mean, people in San Diego don't seem the least bit surprised that between here and Los Angeles is a huge military reservation called [Camp Pendleton](#), the headquarters of the First Marine Division. I was there myself back in the Korean War days. I unfortunately crossed the captain of the LST-883 that I was serving on. We had orders to send an officer to Camp Pendleton and he said, "I know who I'm going to send." It was me. (He laughs) And I'll never forget it. The world of Marine drill sergeants is another universe.

TD: So, returning to our starting point, you saw an empire and...

Johnson: ...it had to be conceptualized. Empires are defined so often as holders of colonies, but analytically, by empire we simply mean the projection of hegemony outward, over other people, using them to serve our interests, regardless of how their interests may be affected.

So what kind of empire is ours? The unit is not the colony, it's the military base. This is not quite as unusual as defenders of the concept of empire often assume. That is to say, we can easily calculate the main military bases of the Roman Empire in the Middle East, and it turns out to be about the same number it takes to garrison the region today. You need about 38 major bases. You can plot them out in Roman times and you can plot them out today.

[An empire of bases](#) -- that's the concept that best explains the logic of the 700 or more military bases around the world acknowledged by the Department of Defense. Now, we're just kidding ourselves that this is to provide security for Americans. In most cases, it's true that we first occupied these bases with some strategic purpose in mind in one of our wars. Then the war ends and we never give them up. We discovered that it's part of the game; it's the perk for the people who fought the war. The Marines to this day believe they deserve to be in Okinawa because of the losses they had in the bloodiest and last big battle of World War II.

I was astonished, however, at how quickly the concept of empire -- though not necessarily an empire of bases -- became acceptable to the neoconservatives and others in the era of the younger Bush. After all, to use the term proudly, as many of them did, meant flying directly in the face of the origins of the United States. We used to pride ourselves on being as anti-imperialist as anybody could be, attacking a king who ruled in such a tyrannical manner. That lasted only, I suppose, until the Spanish-American War. We'd already become an empire well before that, of course.

TD: Haven't we now become kind of a one-legged empire in the sense that, as you've written, just about everything has become military?

The Militarization of American Society

Johnson: That's what's truly ominous about the American empire. In most empires, the military is there, but militarism is so central to ours -- militarism not meaning national defense or even the projection of force for political purposes, but as a way of life, as a way of getting rich or getting comfortable. I guarantee you that the first Marine Division lives better in Okinawa than in Oceanside, California, by considerable orders of magnitude. After the Wall came down, the Soviet troops didn't leave East Germany for five years. They didn't want to go home. They were living so much better in Germany than they knew they would be back in poor Russia.

Most empires try to disguise that military aspect of things. Our problem is: For some reason, we love our military. We regard it as a microcosm of our society and as an institution that works. There's nothing more hypocritical, or constantly invoked by our politicians, than "support our boys." After all, those boys and girls aren't necessarily the most admirable human beings that ever came along, certainly not once they get into another society where they are told they are, by definition, doing good. Then the racism that's such a part of our society emerges very rapidly -- once they get into societies where they don't understand what's going on, where they shout at some poor Iraqi in English.

TD: I assume you'd agree that our imperial budget is the defense budget. Do you want to make some sense of it for us?

Johnson: Part of empire is the way it's penetrated our society, the way we've become dependent on it. Empires in the past -- the Roman Empire, the British Empire, the Japanese Empire -- helped to enrich British citizens, Roman citizens, Japanese citizens. In our society, we don't want to admit how deeply the making and selling of weaponry has become our way of life; that we really have no more than four major weapons manufacturers -- Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics -- but these companies distribute their huge contracts to as many states, as many congressional districts, as possible.

The military budget is starting to bankrupt the country. It's got so much in it that's well beyond any rational military purpose. It equals just less than half of total global military spending. And yet here we are, stymied by two of the smallest, poorest countries on Earth. Iraq before we invaded had a GDP the size of the state of Louisiana and Afghanistan was certainly one of the poorest places on the planet. And yet these two places have stopped us.

Militarily, we've got an incoherent, not very intelligent budget. It becomes less incoherent only when you realize the ways it's being used to fund our industries or that one of the few things we still manufacture reasonably effectively is weapons. It's a huge export business, run not by the companies but by foreign military sales within the Pentagon.

This is not, of course, free enterprise. Four huge manufacturers with only one major customer. This is state socialism and it's keeping the economy running not in the way it's taught in any economics course in any American university. It's closer to what John Maynard Keynes advocated for getting out of the Great Depression – counter-cyclical governmental expenditures to keep people employed.

The country suffers from a collective anxiety neurosis every time we talk about closing bases and it has nothing to do with politics. New England goes just as mad over shutting down the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard as people here in San Diego would if you suggested shutting the Marine Corps Air Station. It's always seen as *our* base. How dare you take away *our* base! Our congressmen must get it back!

This illustrates what I consider the most insidious aspect of our militarism and our military empire. We can't get off it any more. It's not that we're hooked in a narcotic sense. It's just that we'd collapse as an economy if we let it go and we know it. That's the terrifying thing.

And the precedents for this should really terrify us. The greatest single previous example of military Keynesianism -- that is, of taking an economy distraught over recession or depression, over people being very close to the edge and turning it around -- is Germany. Remember, for the five years after Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1933, he was admired as one of the geniuses of modern times. And people *were* put back to work. This was done entirely through military Keynesianism, an alliance between the Nazi Party and German manufacturers.

Many at the time claimed it was an answer to the problems of real Keynesianism, of using artificial government demand to reopen factories, which was seen as strengthening the trade unions, the working class. Capitalists were afraid of government policies that tended to strengthen the working class. They might prove to be revolutionary. They had been often enough in that century. In this country, we were still shell-shocked over Bolshevism; to a certain extent, we still are.

What we've done with our economy is very similar to what Adolf Hitler did with his. We turn out airplanes and other weapons systems in huge numbers. This leads us right back to 1991 when the Soviet Union finally collapsed. We couldn't let the Cold War come to an end. We realized it very quickly. In fact, there are many people who believe that the thrust of the Cold War even as it began, especially in the National Security Council's grand strategy document, [NSC68](#), rested on the clear understanding of late middle-aged Americans who had lived through the Great Depression that the American economy could not sustain itself on the basis of capitalist free enterprise. And that's how -- my god -- in 1966, only a couple of decades after we started down this path, we ended up with some 32,000 nuclear warheads. That was the year of the peak stockpile, which made no sense at all. We still have 9,960 at the present moment.

Now, the 2007 Pentagon budget doesn't make sense either. It's \$439.3 billion...

TD: ... not including war...

Johnson: Not including war! These people have talked us into building a fantastic military apparatus, and then, there was that famous crack [Clinton Secretary of State] Madeleine Albright made to General Colin Powell: "What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Well, if you want to use it today, they charge you another \$120 billion dollars! (He laughs.)

But even the official budget makes no sense. It's filled with weapons like [Lockheed Martin's F-22](#) -- the biggest single contract ever written. It's a stealth airplane and it's absolutely useless. They want to build another [Virginia class nuclear submarine](#). These are just toys for the admirals.

They've completely given up on decent, normal accounting at the Pentagon. [Joseph Stiglitz](#), the Nobel Prize winning economist, and a colleague at Harvard have put together a real Pentagon budget which, for the wars we're fighting right now, comes out to about \$2 trillion. What they've added in are things like interest on the national debt that was used to buy arms in the past. Turns out to be quite a few billion dollars. Above all, they try to get a halfway honest figure for veterans' benefits. For this year, it's officially \$68 billion, which is almost surely way too low given, if nothing more, the huge number of veterans who applied for and received benefits after our first Gulf War.

We almost surely will have to repudiate some of the promises we've made. For instance, Tricare is the government's medical care for veterans, their families. It's a mere \$39 billion for 2007. But those numbers are going to go off the chart. And we can't afford it.

Even that pompous ideologue Donald Rumsfeld seems to have thrown in the towel on the latest budget. Not a thing is cut. Every weapon got through. He stands for "force transformation" and we already have enough nuclear equipment for any imaginable situation, so why on Earth spend anything more? And yet the Department of Energy is spending \$18.5 billion on nuclear weapons in fiscal year 2006, according to former Senior Defense Department Budget Analyst Winslow Wheeler, who is today a researcher with the Center for Defense Information.

TD: Not included in the Pentagon budget.

Johnson: Of course not. This is the Department of Energy's budget.

TD: In other words, there's a whole hidden budget...

Johnson: Oh, it's huge! Three-quarters of a trillion dollars is the number I use for the whole shebang: \$440 billion for the authorized budget; at least \$120 billion for the supplementary war-fighting budget, calculated by Tina Jones, the comptroller of the Department of Defense, at \$6.8 billion per month. Then you add in all the other things out there, above all veterans' care, care of the badly wounded who, not so long ago, would have added up to something more like Vietnam-era casualty figures. In Vietnam, they were dead bodies; these are still living people. They're so embarrassing to the administration that they're flown back at night, offloaded without any citizens seeing what's going on. It's amazing to me that Congressman John Murtha, as big a friend as the defense industry ever had -- you could count on him to buy any crazy missile-defense gimmick, anything in outer space -- seems to have slightly woken up only because he spent some time as an old Marine veteran going to the hospitals.

Another person who may be getting this message across to the public is [Gary Trudeau](#) in some of his Doonesbury cartoons. Tom, I know your mother was [a cartoonist](#) and we both treasure Walt Kelly, who drew the Pogo strip. How applicable is Pogo's most famous line today: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

What I don't understand is that the current defense budget and the recent Quadrennial Defense Review ([which has no strategy](#) in it at all)

are just continuations of everything we did before. Make sure that the couple of hundred military golf courses around the world are well groomed, that the Lear jets are ready to fly the admirals and generals to the Armed Forces ski resort [in Garmisch](#) in the Bavarian Alps or the military's two luxury hotels in [downtown Seoul and Tokyo](#).

Whatever Happened to Congress?

What I can't explain is what has happened to Congress. Is it just that they're corrupt? That's certainly part of it. I'm sitting here in California's 50th district. This past December, our congressman Randy Cunningham confessed to the largest single bribery case in the history of the U.S. Congress: \$2.4 million in trinkets -- a Rolls Royce, some French antiques -- went to him, thanks to his ability as a member of the military subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee to add things secretly to the budget. He was doing this for pals of his running small companies. He was adding things even the Department of Defense said it didn't want.

This is bribery and, as somebody said the other day, Congress comes extremely cheap. For \$2.4 million, these guys got about \$175 million in contracts. It was an easy deal.

The military is out of control. As part of the executive branch, it's expanded under cover of the national security state. Back when I was a kid, the Pentagon was called the Department of War. Now, it's the Department of Defense, though it palpably has nothing to do with defense. Hasn't for a long time. We even have another department of the government today that's concerned with "homeland security." You wonder what on Earth do we have that for -- and a Department of Defense, too!

The government isn't working right. There's no proper supervision. The founders, the authors of the Constitution, regarded the supreme organ to be Congress. The mystery to me -- more than the huge expansion of executive branch powers we've seen since the neoconservatives and George Bush came to power -- is: Why has Congress failed us so completely? Why are they no longer interested in the way the money is spent? Why does a Pentagon budget like this one produce so little interest? Is it that people have a vested interest in it, that it's going to produce more jobs for them?

I wrote an article well before Cunningham confessed called [The Military-Industrial Man](#) in which I identified a lot of what he was doing, but said unfortunately I didn't know how to get rid of him in such a safe district. After it appeared on the *Los Angeles Times* op-ed page, the paper got a couple of letters to the editor from the 34th district in downtown LA saying, I wish he was my congressman. If he'd bring good jobs here, I wouldn't mind making something that just gets blown up or sunk in the ground like missile defense in Alaska. I mean, we've already spent \$100 billion on what amounts to a massive high-tech scarecrow. It couldn't hit a thing. The aiming devices aren't there. The tests fail. It doesn't work. It's certainly a cover for something much more ominous -- the expansion of the Air Force into outer space or "full spectrum dominance," as they like to put it.

We need to concentrate on this, and not from a partisan point of view either. There's no reason to believe the Democrats would do a better job. They never have. They've expanded the armed forces just as fast as the Republicans.

This is the beast we're trying to analyze, to understand, and it seems to me today unstoppable. Put it this way: James Madison, the author of our Constitution, said the right that controls all other rights is the right to get information. If you don't have this, the others don't matter. The Bill of Rights doesn't work if you can't find out what's going on. Secrecy has been going crazy in this country for a long time, but it's become worse by orders of magnitude under the present administration. When John Ashcroft became attorney general, he issued orders that access to the Freedom of Information Act should be made as difficult as possible.

The size of the black budget in the Pentagon has been growing ever larger during this administration. These are projects no one gets to see. To me, one of the most interesting spectacles in our society is watching uniformed military officers like General Michael Hayden, former head of the National Security Agency, sitting in front of Congress, testifying. It happened the other day. Hillary Clinton asked him: Tell us at least approximately how many [NSA warrantless spying] interventions have you made? "I'm not going to tell you" was his answer. Admiral Jacoby, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was asked directly about a year ago, are we still paying Ahmed Chalabi \$340,000 a month? And his reply was, "I'm not going to say."

At this point, shouldn't the senator stand up and say: "I want the U.S. Marshall to arrest that man." I mean this is contempt of Congress.

TD: You're also saying, of course, that there's a reason to have contempt for Congress.

Johnson: There is indeed. You can understand why these guys do it. Richard Helms, the Director of the CIA back in 1977, was convicted of a felony for lying to Congress. He said, no, we had nothing to do with the overthrow of [Chilean President] Salvador Allende when we had everything to do with it. He gets a suspended sentence, pays a small fine, walks into the CIA building at Langley, Virginia and is met by a cheering crowd. Our hero! He's proudly maintained the principles of the secret intelligence service, which is the private army of the president and we have no idea what he's doing with it. Everything they do is secret. Every item in their budget is secret.

TD: And the military, too, has become something of a private army...

Johnson: Exactly. I dislike conscription because it's so easily manipulated, but I do believe in the principle of the obligation of citizens to defend the country in times of crisis. Now, how we do that is still an open question, but at least the citizens' army was a check on militarism. People in the armed forces knew they were there involuntarily. They were extremely interested in whether their officers were competent, whether the strategy made sense, whether the war they might have to fight was justified, and if they began to believe that they were being deeply lied to, as in Vietnam, the American military would start to come apart. The troops then were fragging their officers so seriously that General Creighton Abrams said, we've got to get them out of there. And call it Vietnamization or anything else, that's what they did.

I fear that we're heading that way in Iraq. You open the morning paper and discover that they're now going to start recruiting down to level four, people with serious mental handicaps. The terrible thing is that they'll just be cannon fodder.

It's not rocket science to say that we're talking about a tragedy in the works here. Americans aren't that rich. We had a trade deficit in 2005 of \$725.8 billion. That's a record. It went up almost 25% in just over a year. You can't go on not making things, fighting these kinds of wars, and building weapons that are useless. Herb Stein, when he was chairman of the council of economic advisers in a Republican administration very famously said, "Things that can't go on forever don't."

TD: So put our problems in a nutshell.

Johnson: From George Bush's point of view, his administration has achieved everything ideologically that he wanted to achieve. Militarism has been advanced powerfully. In the minds of a great many people, the military is now the only American institution that appears to work. He's enriched the ruling classes. He's destroyed the separation of powers as thoroughly as was possible. These are the problems that face us right now. The only way you could begin to rebuild the separation of powers would be to reinvigorate the Congress and I don't know what could shock the American public into doing that. They're the only ones who could do it. The courts can't. The President obviously won't.

The only thing I can think of that might do it would be bankruptcy. Like what happened to Argentina in 2001. The richest country in Latin America became one of the poorest. It collapsed. It lost the ability to borrow money and lost control of its affairs, but a great many Argentines did think about what corrupt presidents had listened to what corrupt advice and done what stupid things during the 1990s. And right now, the country is on its way back.

TD: But superpower bankruptcy? It's a concept nobody's really explored. When the British empire finally went, we were behind them. Is there somebody behind us?

Johnson: No.

The Debtor Superpower

TD: So what would it mean for us to go bankrupt? After all, we're not Argentina.

Johnson: It would mean losing control over things. All of a sudden, we would be dependent on the kindness of strangers, looking for handouts. We already have a \$725 billion trade deficit; the largest fiscal deficit in our history, now well over 6% of GDP. The defense budgets are off the charts and don't make any sense, and don't forget that \$500 billion we've already spent on the Iraq war -- every nickel of it borrowed from people in China and Japan who saved and invested because they would like to have access to this market. Any time they decide they don't want to lend to us, interest rates will go crazy and the stock exchange will collapse.

We pour about \$2 billion a day just into servicing the amounts we borrow. The moment people quit lending us that money, we have to get it out of domestic savings and right now we have a negative savings rate in this country. To get Americans to save 20% of their income, you'd have to pay them at least a 20% interest rate and that would produce a truly howling recession. We'd be back to the state of things in the 1930s that my mother used to describe to me -- we lived in the Arizona countryside then -- when someone would tap on the rear door and say, "Have you got any work? I don't want to be paid, I just want to eat." And she'd say, "Sure, we'll find something for you to do and give you eggs and potatoes."

A depression like that would go on in this country for quite a while. The rest of the world would also have a severe recession, but would probably get over it a lot faster.

TD: So you can imagine the Chinese, Japanese, and European economies going on without us, not going down with us.

Johnson: Absolutely. I think they could.

TD: Don't you imagine, for example, that the Chinese bubble economy, the part that's based on export to the United States might collapse, setting off chaos there too?

Johnson: It might, but the Chinese would not blame their government for it. And there is no reason the Chinese economy shouldn't, in the end, run off domestic consumption. When you've got that many people interested in having better lives, they needn't depend forever on selling sweaters and pajamas in North America. The American economy is big, but there's no reason to believe it's so big the rest of the world couldn't do without us. Moreover, we're kidding ourselves because we already manufacture so little today -- except for weapons.

We could pay a terrible price for not having been more prudent. To have been stupid enough to give up on infrastructure, health care, and education in order to put 8 missiles in the ground at Fort Greeley, Alaska that can't hit anything. In fact, when tested, sometimes they don't even get out of their silos.

TD: How long do you see the dollar remaining *the* international currency? I noticed recently that Iran was threatening to switch to Euros.

Johnson: Yes, they're trying to create an oil bourse based on the Euro. Any number of countries might do that. Econ 1A as taught in any American university is going to tell you that a country that runs the biggest trade deficits in economic history must pay a penalty if the global system is to be brought back into equilibrium. What this would mean is a currency so depreciated no American could afford a Lexus automobile. A vacation in Italy would cost Americans a wheelbarrow full of dollars.

The high-growth economies of East Asia now hold huge amounts in American treasury certificates. If the dollar loses its value, the last person to get out of dollars loses everything, so you naturally want to be first. But the person first making the move causes everyone else to panic. So it's a very cautious, yet edgy situation.

A year ago, the head of the Korean Central Bank, which has a couple of hundred billion of our dollars, came out and said: I think we're a little heavily invested in dollars, suggesting that maybe Dubai's currency would be better right now, not to mention the Euro. Instantaneous panic. People started to sell; presidents got on the telephone asking: What in the world are you people up to? And the Koreans backed down -- and so it continues.

There are smart young American PhDs in economics today inventing theories about why this will go on forever. One is that there's a global savings glut. People have too much money and nothing to do with it, so they loan it to us. Even so, as the very considerable economics correspondent for the *Nation* magazine, [William Greider](#), has written several times, it's extremely unwise for the world's largest debtor to go around insulting his bankers. We're going to send [four aircraft-carrier task forces](#) to the Pacific this summer to intimidate the Chinese, sail around, fly our airplanes, shoot off a few cruise missiles. Why shouldn't the Chinese say, let's get out of dollars. Okay, they don't want a domestic panic of their own, so the truth is they would do it as subtly as they could, causing as little fuss as possible.

What does this administration think it's doing, reducing taxes when it needs to be reducing huge deficits? As far as I can see, its policies have nothing to do with Republican or Democratic ideology, except that its opposite would be traditional, old Republican conservatism, in the sense of being fiscally responsible, not wasting our money on aircraft carriers or other nonproductive things.

But the officials of this administration are radicals. They're crazies. We all speculate on why they do it. Why has the President broken the Constitution, let the military spin virtually out of control, making it the only institution he would turn to for anything -- another Katrina disaster, a bird flu epidemic? The whole thing seems farcical, but what it does remind you of is ancient Rome.

If a bankruptcy situation doesn't shake us up, then I fear we will, as an author I admire wrote the other day, be "crying for the coup." We could end the way the Roman Republic ended. When the chaos, the instability become too great, you turn it over to a single man. After about the same length of time our republic has been in existence, the Roman Republic got itself in that hole by inadvertently, thoughtlessly acquiring an empire they didn't need and weren't able to administer, that kept them at war all the time. Ultimately, it caught up with them. I can't see how we would be immune to a Julius Caesar, to a militarist who acts the populist.

TD: Do you think that our all-volunteer military will turn out to be the janissaries of our failed empire?

Johnson: They might very well be. I'm already amazed at the degree to which they tolerate this incompetent government. I mean the officers know that their precious army, which they worked so hard to rebuild after the Vietnam War, is coming apart again, that it's going to be ever harder to get people to enlist, that even the military academies are in trouble. I don't know how long they'll take it. [Tommy Franks](#), the general in charge of the attack on Baghdad, did say that if there were another terrorist attack in the United States comparable to 9/11, the military might have no choice but to take over. In other words: If we're going to do the work, why listen to incompetents like George Bush? Why take orders from an outdated character like Donald Rumsfeld? Why listen to a Congress in which, other than John McCain, virtually no Republican has served in the armed forces?

Can American Democracy Be Restored?

I don't see the obvious way out of our problems. The political system has failed. You could elect the opposition party, but it can't bring the CIA under control; it can't bring the military-industrial complex under control; it can't reinvigorate the Congress. It would be just another holding operation as conditions got worse.

Now, I'll grant you, I could be wrong. If I am, you're going to be so glad, you'll forgive me. [He laughs.] In the past, we've had clear excesses of executive power. There was Lincoln and the suspension of *habeas corpus*. Theodore Roosevelt virtually invented the executive order. Until then, most presidents didn't issue executive orders. Roosevelt issued well over a thousand. It was the equivalent of today's presidential signing statement. Then you go on to the mad Presbyterian Woodrow Wilson, whom the neocons are now so in love with, and Franklin Roosevelt and his pogrom against Americans of Japanese ancestry. But there was always a tendency afterwards for the pendulum to swing back, for the American public to become concerned about what had been done in its name and correct it. What's worrying me is: Can we expect a pendulum swing back this time?

TD: Maybe there is no pendulum.

Johnson: Today, Cheney tells us that presidential powers have been *curtailed* by the War Powers Act [of 1973], congressional oversight of the intelligence agencies, and so on. This strikes me as absurd, since these modest reforms were made to deal with the grossest violations of the Constitution in the Nixon administration. Moreover, most of them were stillborn. There's not a president yet who has acknowledged the War Powers Act as legitimate. They regard themselves as not bound by it, even though it was an act of Congress and, by our theory of government, unless openly unconstitutional, that's the bottom line. A nation of laws? No, we are not. Not anymore.

TD: Usually we believe that the Cold War ended with the Soviet Union's collapse and, in essence, our victory. A friend of mine put it another way. The United States, he suggested, was so much more powerful than the USSR that we had a greater capacity to shift our debts elsewhere. The Soviets didn't and so imploded. My question is this: Are we now seeing the delayed end of the Cold War? Perhaps both superpowers were headed for the proverbial trash bin of history, simply at different rates of speed?

Johnson: I've always believed that they went first because they were poorer and that the terrible, hubristic conclusion we drew -- that we were victorious, that we won -- was off the mark. I always felt that we both lost the Cold War for the same reasons -- imperial overstretch, excessive militarism, things that have been identified by students of empires since Babylonia. We've never given Mikhail Gorbachev credit. Most historians would say that no empire ever gave up voluntarily. The only one I can think of that tried was the Soviet Union under him.

TD: Any last words?

Johnson: I'm still working on them. My first effort was [Blowback](#). That was well before I anticipated anything like massive terrorist attacks in the United States. It was a statement that the foreign-policy problems -- I still just saw them as that -- of the first part of the 21st century were going to be left over from the previous century, from our rapacious activities in Latin America, from our failure to truly learn the lessons of Vietnam. [The Sorrows of Empire](#) was an attempt to come to grips with our militarism. Now, I'm considering how we've managed to alienate so many rich, smart allies -- every one of them, in fact. How we've come to be so truly hated. This, in a Talleyrand sense, is the sort of mistake from which you can't recover. That's why I'm planning on calling the third volume of what I now think of as "The Blowback Trilogy," *Nemesis*. Nemesis was the Greek goddess of vengeance. She also went after people who became too arrogant, who were so taken with themselves that they lost all prudence. She was always portrayed as a fierce figure with a scale in one hand -- think, Judgment Day -- and a whip in the other...

TD: And you believe she's coming after us?

Johnson: Oh, I believe she's arrived. I think she's sitting around waiting for her moment, the one we're coming up on right now.

*This interview with Chalmers Johnson first appeared at [Tomdispatch.com](#), a weblog of the Nation Institute, which offers a steady flow of alternate sources, news, and opinion from Tom Engelhardt, long time editor in publishing, co-founder of the American Empire Project and author of *The End of Victory Culture*. Chalmers Johnson is completing the third volume in the Blowback Trilogy. Posted at Japan Focus, March 29, 2006.*