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Corporate Media, Political Elites, and Perpetual War

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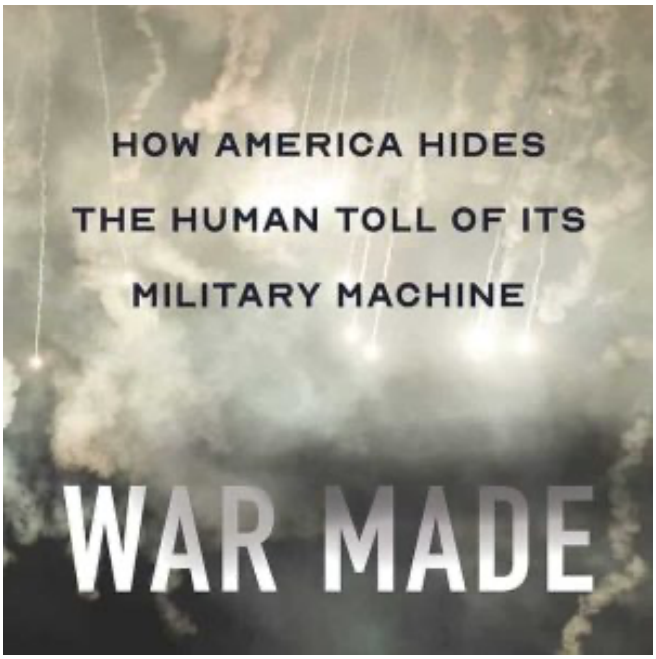
Long recognised as one of this country's most incisive journalists and media critics, Norman Solomon has written a new book that deserves to be widely read. In less than three hundred pages, he marshals a remarkable amount of information to document the contours of the so-called war on terror waged by the United States since 9/11, the terrible human costs incurred abroad and at home, and the ways in which corporate media and political elites strive to make this perpetual war and its catastrophic consequences almost entirely invisible to the public. The book is replete with important insights into how the media establishment and government officials from both major political parties promote the interests of the military-industrial complex. In War Made Invisible, readers will also find an eloquent moral call to end this state of affairs. All things considered, this volume is a valuable contribution to the literature on the role of corporate media and political elites in sustaining the war on terror.



Twenty-six days after the 9/11 attack on the United States, President George W. Bush ordered the bombing of al Qaeda training camps and Taliban military targets in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban regime fell within two months, Solomon explains that the war on terror was "just getting started" (2). He notes that this rubric "became—for the White House, Pentagon, and Congress—a political license to kill and displace people on a large scale" (3). Thousands of U.S. military personnel, allied troops, and military contractors fought a resurgent Taliban for the next two decades and inflicted enormous casualties, but were eventually forced to withdraw. The Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in March 2003 led to an even more calamitous loss of life, destabilised the entire region, and "fostered the formation of terroristic

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groups such as ISIS" (30). Major military interventions have also occurred in Pakistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines. Altogether, the United States has bombed a total of twenty-two countries on four continents since October 2001.

Solomon cites the finding of Brown University's Costs of War Project that "at least 929,000 people have died due to direct war violence" and "many times more have died indirectly" (160). Washington's wars have displaced between thirty-eight and sixty million people in eight countries (138, 160). The longer-term effects include "the decimation of entire societies and nations," the "crushing of infrastructure," "ecological destruction," and "the terror imposed on daily life for years on end" (96). Perpetual war has profound domestic costs, too. More than fifteen thousand U.S. military personnel and contractors have died, and hundreds of thousands have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injury. Suicide, domestic violence, and sexual assault plague active-duty personnel and veterans. In addition, the military budget "sops up funds that could be devoted to health care, education, housing, job creation, and much more" (156). Military contractors reap "gargantuan profits" from perpetual war "while economic conditions have worsened or stayed precarious for most Americans" (157).

This book underscores the significance of both omission and repetition in U.S. war propaganda. For Solomon, the most important lacuna since 9/11 is the millions of deaths, largely of people of color. Moreover, these deaths have been "occurring almost completely out of sight and mind" (13). The horrific human toll in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries attacked by the United States has been "of little or no media consequence" (8). Instead of making war more humane, the Pentagon's advanced technology, air power, and remote drones have killed more civilians than combatants, indeed, "far more civilians than al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have" (30). Yet policymakers and media executives largely ignore—and dehumanise—those dying in faraway lands. Consequently, people in the United States are "conditioned to accept ongoing wars without ever really knowing what they're doing to people we'll never see" (15). Solomon contrasts the virtual invisibility of deaths in the war on terror with the media's "wall-to-wall spotlight on Ukraine war horrors" (134). As Hassan El-Tayyab of the Friends Committee on National Legislation has observed, this contrast reveals that "white lives matter more to them than black/brown lives" (134).

Moreover, the media establishment has reiterated constantly Washington's rationale for the war on terror. After 9/11, many media outlets were "filled with calls for retribution" and energetically endorsed military intervention in Afghanistan (7). Many of them also parroted the Bush administration's false claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties to al Qaeda. After the invasion of Iraq began, "affirmative news coverage was standard operating procedure" and reports by journalists embedded with U.S. troops led the public "to identify with the bombers instead of the people who were being bombed" (26, 27). Solomon points out that systemic U.S. militarism historically "gets little public attention," and while debate on "how, where, and when" to go to war can be found in the media, "the prerogative of military intervention is scarcely questioned" (17–18). Instead, government officials and media outlets continually invoke the rhetoric of "American exceptionalism," which Solomon denounces as "finery" cloaking the horrors of U.S. militarism (196). Quoting Daniel Ellsberg, he blasts the media for promoting the fiction that "we are superior in our morality and our perceptions of the world," while concealing the fact that we are "citizens of an empire," which asserts "the right to determine who governs other countries" (194–95).

Most U.S. journalists have been unwilling "to break ranks with the gist of Washington's official war narratives" (34–35). With rare exceptions, in-studio anchors, commentators, and journalists accept "as a given the good intentions of U.S. policymakers" and disseminate the government's positions (77). The media also routinely glorify U.S. military personnel,

depicting them as defenders of freedom instead of purveyors of death around the world. Academics, journalists, and activists opposed to Washington's wars are rarely invited to share their views. Although "instances of high-quality, against-the-grain journalism" on the war on terror have appeared, they are exceptions (102). When the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq failed to achieve U.S. strategic objectives and public support declined, some media outlets and politicians began to call the wars "mistakes" (186). But "convenient amnesia" about previous deceptions, "fatuous claims about the past," and the "belated telling of partial truths" demonstrate the "structural mendacity" of the military-industrial complex (186–87).

Corporate media leaders make sure that employees understand their perspective on the U.S. role in international affairs and act accordingly. After the attack on Afghanistan began, CNN chairman Walter Isaacson ordered journalists not to report on civilian deaths and injuries there without recalling the suffering of 9/11 victims (116). In addition to the pressures of "nationalism, commercialism, and professional conformity," journalists' "concerns about job security" and "desires for career advancement" foster compliance and "self-censorship" (20). The experiences of Phil Donahue and Ashleigh Banfield demonstrate what can happen to journalists who step out of line. Donahue, the host of MSNBC's most highly rated prime-time program and one of the few prominent media voices opposing an invasion of Iraq, was fired three weeks before the bombing began. A leaked internal memorandum explained that his program represented "a difficult public face for NBC in a time of war" (184). In a speech at Kansas State University a month after the invasion of Iraq, Banfield, an acclaimed correspondent and rising star at MSNBC, criticised the media's "glorious, wonderful picture" of the war because "there are horrors that were completely left out" (73). Network executives publicly rebuked Banfield and her career at MSNBC soon came to an end.

Although War Made Invisible is a valuable contribution to the literature on the war on terror, some of what the author says—and does not say—invites critical scrutiny. The book arguably overstates the success of corporate media and political elites' efforts to "hide the human toll" of U.S. militarism. As Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky affirmed in Manufacturing Consent, "propaganda emanating from the media" is not always effective.[1] Solomon does not mention the scores of thousands of people in the United States who marched against the war in Afghanistan. Nor does he say much about the hundreds of thousands of people who protested the invasion of Iraq, and his assertion that they "drew little media coverage" is puzzling (191). Many media outlets reported on domestic and foreign opposition, even as they repeated the Bush administration's lies about the invasion.[2] Within two years, U.S. public opinion had begun to turn against the war in Iraq.[3] Solomon acknowledges that the government's credibility has "badly corroded" after twenty years of the war on terror, but corporate media and government propaganda may have even more limited reach than he suggests (186). This volume would have been stronger if it had explored the ramifications of declining public confidence in traditional media and government institutions and the growing role of social media as sources of news.

Unfortunately, Solomon equivocates on the issue of deliberate murders committed by U.S. military forces. He contends that "unlike terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and their jihadist leaders, the U.S. government and its war planners do not deliberately kill civilians," though such deaths are "predictable" and "virtually inevitable" as a result of "policy priorities" (53–54). He allows that "for those killed and for their loved ones, the contrast can be a distinction without a difference" (53). However, elsewhere in the book, Solomon condemns "the cavalier killing of eleven Iraqi civilians" by

[1] ↩ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media (New York: Pantheon, 2002), xii.

[2] ↩ See, for example, "Cities Jammed in Worldwide Protest of War in Iraq," New York Times, February 16, 2003; Michael Janofsky, "Antiwar Rallies in Washington and Other Cities," New York Times, September 25, 2005; "Stars Against Iraq War," CBS News, January 29, 2007; and Kristen M. Daum, "Protests Mark Iraq War's 5th Anniversary," Los Angeles Times, March 20, 2008.

[3] ↩ "Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003–2008," Pew Research Center, March 19, 2008.

It is incontrovertible that U.S. military personnel have intentionally killed many noncombatants in the war on terror... Perpetual war and its routinisation are hardly twenty-first century developments. The United States has been at war—of one kind or another—since its founding.

helicopter gunship fire in Baghdad in 2007 (122). He notes that WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange published "huge troves of documents" on "massacres of civilians by the U.S. military" received from former U.S. intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning (123). Solomon also commends Manning for "not just disclosing 'mistakes' but also bringing to light patterns of war crimes" (124). It is incontrovertible that U.S. military personnel have intentionally killed many noncombatants in the war on terror.[4] Because the deaths of civilians are often "predictable" and "virtually inevitable" in military operations, commanders who order such actions are also implicitly authorising the killing of noncombatants.

Solomon exaggerates the historical significance of the war on terror when he claims it has "normalised war as an ongoing American way of life" (179). Perpetual war and its routinisation are hardly twenty-first century developments. The United States has been at war—of one kind or another—since its founding.[5] U.S. history includes genocidal wars against Indigenous peoples; expansionist wars against Britain, Mexico, Spain, and the Philippines; the Civil War; two world wars; the invasion of Soviet Russia; anticommunist wars in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; the Gulf War; the present war on terror; and much more. As I have argued elsewhere, U.S. rulers are responsible or share responsibility for hundreds of millions of related deaths.[6] The intentional killing of civilians in other countries has long been an especially outrageous feature of U.S. military operations. Some of the most infamous U.S. massacres occurred in Kuala Batu, Sumatra, in 1832; Veracruz and Mexico City, Mexico, in 1847; Samar, the Philippines, in 1901; Les Cayes, Haiti, in 1929; No Gun Ri, Korea, in 1950; My Lai, Vietnam, in 1968; and Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1989.[7] Approximately one million civilians died in the U.S.-British bombing of Japanese and German cities during the Second World War.[8] Of the more than two hundred thousand people who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the vast majority were noncombatants.[9]

Finally, War Made Invisible does not directly confront the capitalist economic system in which the military-industrial complex and the "warfare state" are rooted... Ending U.S. militarism and perpetual war will require us to face the truth about capitalism and the need for what King called "the radical reconstruction of society itself."

4 ↩ Some examples are discussed in Douglas Jehl, "Army Details Scale of Abuse in Afghan Jail," New York Times, March 12, 2005; Declan Walsh, "Afghanistan War Logs: How U.S. Marines Sanitized Record of Bloodbath," Guardian, July 26, 2010; Barbara Starr, "Army: 12 Soldiers Killed Afghans, Mutilated Corpses," CNN, September 10, 2010; Emma Graham-Harrison, "U.S. Soldier Kills Up to 16 Civilians in Shooting Spree," Guardian, March 11, 2012; Edmund Blair, "Anger Mounts After U.S. Troops Kill 13 Iraqi Protesters," Reuters, April 29, 2003, archived on Common Dreams News Center, commondreams.org; Charlie Savage and Elisabeth Bumiller, "An Iraqi Massacre, a Light Sentence, and a Question of Military Justice," New York Times, January 27, 2012; Josh White, "Soldier Gets 90 Years in Rape, Killing of Girl," Washington Post, November 17, 2006; and Michael Safi, "Trump Pardons Blackwater Contractors Jailed for Massacre of Iraqi Civilians," Guardian, December 23, 2020.

5 ↩ This important point is capably made in David Vine, The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, From Columbus to the Islamic State (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

6 ↩ David Michael Smith, Endless Holocausts: Mass Death in the History of the United States Empire (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023).

7 ↩ Sabri Zain, "The United States Attack on Kuala Batu," in Sejarah Melayu: A History of the Malay Peninsula, sabrizain.org/malaya, cited in Endless Holocausts, 377n86; Amy Greenberg, A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 Invasion of Mexico (New York: Vintage, 2012), 170–71, 210–11, 223; Richard C. Paddock, "U.S. Set to Return Philippine Bells That Once Tolled to Mark a Massacre," New York Times, August 13, 2018; Edwidge Danticat, "The Long Legacy of Occupation in Haiti," New Yorker, July 28, 2015; "G.I.'s Tell of a U.S. Massacre in Korean War," New York Times, September 30, 1999; Shaun Raviv, "The Ghosts of My Lai," Smithsonian Magazine (January 2018); and Michael Parenti, To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia (London: Verso, 2000), 120.

8 ↩ Herman Knell, To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and Its Human Consequences in World War II (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo, 2003), 1, 334, cited in Endless Holocausts, 396n411.

9 ↩ Micheal Clodfelter, Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Encyclopedia of Casualty and Other Figures, 1494–2007, 3rd ed. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarlane and Company, 2008), 559–60, cited in Endless Holocausts, 397n414.

Finally, War Made Invisible does not directly confront the capitalist economic system in which the military-industrial complex and the "warfare state" are rooted (188). Solomon allows that this society may be an "oligarchy," describes the domestic consequences of perpetual war as the product of "class war," and quotes a few sources who refer to "empire" and "imperialism" (143, 151, 156–57, 194). He also recognises the centrality of oil interests in the invasion of Iraq. However, he does not acknowledge the imperatives of expansion and accumulation inherent in capitalism and its inexorable structural drive to exploit the resources, markets, and labor of people in other countries. Solomon criticises "American exceptionalism" for concealing "naked self-interest, aggrandisement, profit-taking from arms sales, international leverage for economic gain, and geopolitical positioning" (196). Still, much more needs to be said about the U.S. ruling class, contemporary monopoly-finance capitalism, and imperialism. Solomon invokes Martin Luther King Jr.'s opposition to militarism, racism, and poverty, but declines to mention his critique of capitalism. Yet King insisted that these "evils" are "rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society."[10] It is ironic that Solomon concludes the book by quoting James Baldwin's remark that "nothing can be changed until it is faced" (197). Ending U.S. militarism and perpetual war will require us to face the truth about capitalism and the need for what King called "the radical reconstruction of society itself."[11]

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[10] ↩ Martin Luther King Jr., "A Testament of Hope" (1968), in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. James Melvin Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 315.

[11] ↩ King, "A Testament of Hope."

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