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Precision Warfare? Don't Make Me Laugh

You remember. It was supposed to be twenty-first-century war, American-style: precise beyond imagining; smart bombs; drones capable of taking out a carefully identified and tracked human being just about anywhere on Earth; special operations raids so pinpoint-accurate that they would represent a triumph of modern military science. Everything “networked.” It was to be a glorious dream of limited destruction combined with unlimited power and success. In reality, it would prove to be a nightmare of the first order.

If you want a single word to summarize American war-making in this last decade and a half, I would suggest rubble. It's been a painfully apt term since September 11, 2001. In addition, to catch the essence of such war in this century, two new words might be useful: rubblize and rubblization. Let me explain what I mean.

In recent weeks, another major city in Iraq has officially been “[liberated](#)” ([almost](#)) from the militants of the Islamic State. However, the results of the U.S.-backed Iraqi military campaign to retake Mosul, that country's second largest city, don't fit any ordinary definition of triumph or victory. It began in October 2016 and, at nine months and counting, has been

[longer than](#)

the World War II battle of Stalingrad. Week after week, in street to street fighting, with

[U.S. airstrikes](#)

repeatedly called in on neighborhoods still filled with terrified Mosulites, unknown but

[potentially staggering](#)

numbers of civilians have died.

[More than a million](#)

people -- yes, you read that figure correctly -- were uprooted from their homes and major portions of the Western half of the city they fled, including its ancient historic sections, have been turned into

[rubble](#)

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This should be the definition of victory as defeat, success as disaster. It's also a pattern. It's been the essential story of the American war on terror since, in the month after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush loosed American air power on Afghanistan. That first air campaign began what has increasingly come to look like the full-scale rubblization of significant parts of the Greater Middle East.

By not simply going after the crew who committed those attacks but deciding to take down the Taliban, occupy Afghanistan, and in 2003, invade Iraq, Bush's administration opened the proverbial can of worms in that vast region. An imperial urge to overthrow Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein, who had once been Washington's [guy](#) in the Middle East only to become its mortal enemy (and who had nothing whatsoever to do with 9/11), proved one of the fatal miscalculations of the imperial era.

So, too, did the deeply [engrained fantasy](#) of Bush administration officials that they controlled a high-tech, precision military that could project power in ways no other nation on the planet or in history ever had; a military that would be, in the [president's words](#), "the greatest force for human liberation the world has ever known." With Iraq occupied and garrisoned ([Korea-style](#)) for generations to come, his top officials assumed that they would take down fundamentalist Iran (sound familiar?) and other hostile regimes in the region, creating a *Pax Americana* there. (Hence, the particular irony of the present [Iranian ascendancy](#) in Iraq.) In the pursuit of such fantasies of global power, the Bush administration, in effect, punched a devastating hole in the oil heartlands of the Middle East. In the [pungent imagery](#) of Abu Musa, head of the Arab League at the time, the U.S. chose to drive straight through "the gates of hell."

Rubblizing the Greater Middle East

In the 15-plus years since 9/11, parts of an expanding swathe of the planet -- from Pakistan's borderlands in South Asia to Libya in North Africa -- were catastrophically unsettled. Tiny groups of Islamic terrorists multiplied exponentially into both local and transnational

organizations, spreading across the region with the help of American “precision” warfare and the anger it stirred among helpless civilian populations. States began to totter or [fail](#). Countries essentially collapsed, loosing a [tide of refugees](#) on the world, as year after year, the U.S. military, its [Special Operations forces](#), and the CIA were increasingly deployed in one fashion or another in one country after another.

Though in case after case the results were visibly disastrous, like so many addicts, the three post-9/11 administrations in Washington seemed incapable of drawing the obvious conclusions and instead continued to do [more of the same](#) (with modest adjustments of one sort of another). The results, unsurprisingly enough, were similarly disappointing or disastrous.

Despite the doubts about such a form of global warfare that candidate Trump raised during the 2016 election campaign, the process has only escalated in the first months of his presidency. Washington, it seems, just can’t help itself in its drive to pursue this version of war in all its grim imprecision to its increasingly imprecise but predictably destructive conclusions. Worse yet, if the leading military and political figures in Washington have their way, none of this may end in our lifetime. (In recent years, for example, the Pentagon and those who channel its thoughts have begun speaking of a “[generational approach](#)” or a “[generational struggle](#)” in Afghanistan.)

If anything, so many years after it was launched, the war on terror shows every sign of continuing to expand and rubble is increasingly the name of the game. Here’s a very partial tally sheet on the subject:

In addition to Mosul, a number of Iraq’s other major cities and towns -- including [Ramadi](#) and [Fallujah](#) -- have also been reduced to rubble. Across the border in Syria, where a brutal civil war has been raging for six years, numerous cities and towns from [Homs](#) to parts of [Aleppo](#) have essentially been destroyed. Raqqa, the “capital” of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, is now under siege. (American Special Operations forces are already [reportedly active](#) inside its breached walls, working with allied Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces.) It, too, will be “liberated” sooner or later -- that is to say, destroyed.

As in Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi, American planes have been striking ISIS positions in the urban heart of Raqqa and [killing civilians](#), evidently in sizeable numbers, while rubblizing parts of the city. And such activities have in recent years only been spreading. In distant Libya, for instance, the city of [Sirte](#) is in ruins after a similar struggle involving local forces, American air power, and ISIS militants. In Yemen, for the last two years the Saudis have been conducting a never-ending air campaign (with [American support](#)), significantly aimed at the civilian population; they have, that is, been rubblizing that country, while paving the way for a [devastating famine](#) and a horrific [cholera epidemic](#) that can't be checked, given the condition of that impoverished, embattled land.

Only recently, this sort of destruction has spread for the first time beyond the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa. In late May, on the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines, local Muslim rebels [identified with ISIS](#) took Marawi City. Since they moved in, much of its population of 200,000 has been displaced and almost two months later they [still hold](#) parts of the city, while engaged in Mosul-style urban warfare with the Filipino military ([backed by](#) U.S. Special Operations advisers). In the process, the area has [reportedly suffered](#) Mosul-style rubblization.

In most of these rubblized cities and the regions around them, even when “victory” is declared, worse yet is in sight. In Iraq, for instance, with the “caliphate” of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi now being dismantled, ISIS remains a [genuinely threatening](#) guerilla force, the Sunni and Shiite communities (including armed Shiite militias) show little sign of coming together, and in the north of the country the Kurds are [thr](#) [eatening](#) to declare an independent state. So fighting of various sorts is essentially guaranteed and the [possibility](#) of Iraq turning into a full-scale failed state or several devastated mini-states remains all too real, even as the Trump administration is reportedly [pushing](#) Congress for permission to construct and occupy new “temporary” military bases and other facilities in the country (and in neighboring Syria).

Worse yet, across the Greater Middle East, “reconstruction” is basically [not even a concept](#) . There’s simply no money for it. Oil prices remain deeply [depressed](#) and, from Libya and Yemen to Iraq and Syria, countries are either too poor or too divided to begin the reconstruction of much of anything. Nor -- and this is a given -- will Donald Trump’s America be launching the war-on-terror equivalent of a Marshall Plan for the region. And even if it did, the record of the post-9/11 years already shows that the highly militarized American version of “reconstruction” or “nation building” via crony [warrior corporations](#) in both Iraq and Afghanistan has been one of the [great scams](#) of our time. (More American taxpayer dollars have been poured into reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan alone than went into [the whole](#) of the Marshall Plan and it’s painfully obvious how effective that proved to be.)

Of course, as in Syria’s civil war, Washington is hardly responsible for all the destruction in the region. ISIS itself has been a remarkably destructive and brutal killing machine with its own [impressive record](#) of urban rubblization. And yet most of the destruction in the region was triggered, at least, by the militarized dreams and plans of the Bush administration, by its response to 9/11 (which ended up being something like Osama bin Laden’s [dream scenario](#)). Don’t forget that ISIS’s predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, was a creature of the American invasion and occupation of that country and that ISIS itself was [essentially formed](#) in an American military prison camp in that country where its future caliph was confined.

And in case you think any lessons have been learned from all of this, think again. In the first months of the Trump administration, the U.S. has essentially decided on a new [mini-surge](#) of troops and air power in Afghanistan; [deployed](#) for the first time the largest non-nuclear weapon in its arsenal there; promised the Saudis more support in their war in Yemen; has [increased](#) its air strikes and special operations activities in Somalia; is [preparing](#) for a new U.S. military presence in Libya; increased U.S. forces and [eased the rules](#) for air strikes in civilian areas of Iraq and elsewhere; and sent U.S. special operators and other personnel in rising numbers into both Iraq and Syria.

No matter the president, the ante only seems to go up when it comes to the "war on terror," a war of imprecision that has helped [uproot](#) record numbers of people on this planet, with the usual predictable results: the further spread of terror groups, the further destabilization of state structures, rising numbers of displaced and dead civilians, and the rubblization of expanding parts of the planet.

While no one would deny the destructive potential of great imperial powers historically, the American empire of destruction may be unique. At the height of its military strength in these years, it has been utterly incapable of translating that power advantage into anything but rubblization.

Living in the Rubble, a Short History of the Twenty-First Century

Let me speak personally here, since I live in the remarkably protected and peaceful heart of that empire of destruction and in the very city where it all began. What eternally puzzles me is the inability of those who run that imperial machinery to absorb what's actually happened since 9/11 and draw any reasonable conclusions from it. After all, so much of what I've been describing seems, at this point, dismally predictable.

If anything, the "generational" nature of the war on terror and the way it became a permanent war of terror should by now seem too obvious for discussion. And yet, whatever he said on the campaign trail, President Trump promptly appointed to key positions the [very generals](#) who have long been immersed in fighting America's wars across the Greater Middle East and are clearly ready to do more of the same. Why in the world anyone, even those generals, should imagine that such an approach could result in anything more "successful" is beyond me.

In many ways, rubblization has been at the heart of this whole process, starting with the 9/11 moment. After all, the very point of those attacks was to turn the symbols of American power -- the Pentagon (military power); the World Trade Center (financial power); and the Capitol or some other Washington edifice (political power, as the hijacked plane that [crashed](#) in a field in Pennsylvania was undoubtedly heading there) -- into so much rubble. In the process, thousands of innocent civilians were slaughtered.

In some ways, much of the rubblization of the Greater Middle East in recent years could be thought of as, however unconsciously, a campaign of vengeance for the horror and insult of the air assaults on that September morning in 2001, which pulverized the tallest towers of my hometown. Ever since, American war has, in a sense, involved paying Osama bin Laden back in kind, but on a staggering scale. In Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, a shocking but passing moment for Americans has become everyday life for whole populations and innocents have died in numbers that would add up to so many World Trade Centers piled atop each other.

The origins of *TomDispatch*, the website I run, also lie in the rubble. I was in New York City on that day. I experienced the shock of the attacks and the smell of those burning buildings. A friend of mine saw a hijacked plane hitting one of the towers and another biked into the smoke-filled area looking for his daughter. I went down to the site of the attacks with my own daughter within days and wandered the nearby streets, catching glimpses of those giant shards of destroyed buildings.

In the phrase of that moment, in the wake of 9/11, everything “changed” and, in a sense, indeed it did. I felt it. Who didn't? I noted the sense of fear rising nationally and the repetitious ceremonies across the country in which Americans hailed themselves as the planet's most exceptional victims, survivors, and (in the future) victors. In those post-9/11 weeks, I became increasingly aware of how a growing sense of shock and a desire for vengeance among the populace was freeing Bush administration officials (who had for years [been dreaming](#) about making the “lone superpower” omnipotent in a historically unprecedented way) to act more or less as they wished.

As for myself, I was overcome by a sense that the period to follow would be the worst of my life, far worse than the Vietnam era (the last time I had been truly mobilized politically). And of one thing I was certain: things would not go well. I had an urge to do something, though no idea what.

In early October 2001, the Bush administration unleashed its air power on Afghanistan, a campaign that, in a sense, would never end but simply spread across the Greater Middle East. (By now, the U.S. has launched repeated air strikes in at least [seven countries](#) in the region.) At that moment, someone emailed me an article by Tamim Ansary, an Afghan who had been in the U.S. for years but had continued to follow events in his country of birth.

His piece, which [appeared](#) at the website *Counterpunch*, would prove prescient indeed,

especially since it had been written in mid-September, just days after 9/11. At that moment, as Ansary noted, Americans were already threatening -- in a phrase adopted from the Vietnam War era -- to bomb Afghanistan "back to the Stone Age." What purpose, he wondered, could possibly be served by such a bombing campaign since, as he put it, "new bombs would only stir the rubble of earlier bombs"? As he pointed out, Afghanistan, then largely ruled by the grim Taliban, had essentially been turned into rubble years before in the

[proxy war](#)

the Soviets and Americans fought there until the Red Army limped home in defeat in 1989. The rubble that was already Afghanistan would only increase in the brutal civil war that followed. And in the years before 2001, little had been rebuilt. So, as Ansary made clear, the U.S. was about to launch its air power for the first time in the twenty-first century against a country with nothing, a country of ruins and in ruins.

From such an act he predicted disaster. And so it would be. At the time, something about that image of air strikes on rubble stunned me, in part because it felt both horrifying and true, in part because it seemed such an ominous signal of what might lie in our future, and in part because nothing like it could then be found in the mainstream news or in any kind of debate about how to respond to 9/11 (of which there was essentially none). Impulsively, I emailed his piece out with a note of my own to friends and relatives, something I had never done before. That, as it turned out, would be the start of what became an ever-expanding no-name listserv and, a little more than a year later, [TomDispatch](#).

A Plutocracy of the Rubble?

So the first word to fully catch my attention and set me in motion in the post-9/11 era was "rubble." It's sad that, almost 16 years later, Americans are still obsessively afraid for themselves, a fear that has helped fund and build a national security state of staggering dimensions. On the other hand, remarkably few of us have any sense of the endless 9/11-style experiences our military has so imprecisely delivered to the world. The bombs may be smart, but the acts couldn't be dumber.

In this country, there is essentially no sense of responsibility for the spread of terrorism, the crumbling of states, the destruction of lives and livelihoods, the tidal flow of [refugees](#), and the rubblization of some of the planet's great cities. There's no reasonable assessment of the true nature and effects of American warfare abroad: its imprecision, its idiocy, its destructiveness. In this peaceful land, it's hard to imagine the true impact of the imprecision of war, American-style. Given the way things are going, it's easy enough, however, to imagine the scenario of Tamim Ansari writ large in the Trump years and those to follow: Americans

continuing to bomb the rubble they had such a hand in creating across the Greater Middle East.

And yet distant imperial wars do have a way of coming home, and not just in the form of [new surveillance techniques](#)

, or drones

[flying](#)

over “the homeland,” or the full-scale

[militarization](#)

of police forces. Without those disastrous, never-ending wars, I suspect that the election of Donald Trump would have been

[unlikely](#)

. And while he will not loose such “precision” warfare on the homeland itself, his project (and that of the congressional Republicans) -- from health care to the environment -- is visibly aimed at rubblizing American society. If he were capable, he would certainly create a plutocracy of the rubble in a world where ruins are increasingly the norm.