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Why Is American Aggression Missing in Action?

Headlined “U.S. Seeks Other Ways to Stop Iran Shy of War,” the article was [tucked away](#) on page A9 of a recent *New York Times*

. Still, it caught my attention. Here's the first paragraph:

“American intelligence and military officers are working on additional clandestine plans to counter Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf, pushed by the White House to develop new options that could help deter Tehran without escalating tensions into a full-out conventional war, according to current and former officials.”

Note that “Iranian aggression.” The rest of the piece, fairly typical of the tone of American media coverage of the ongoing Iran crisis, included sentences like this: “The C.I.A. has longstanding secret plans for responding to Iranian provocations.” I’m sure I’ve read such things hundreds of times without ever really stopping to think much about them, but this time I did. And what struck me was this: [rare](#) is the moment in such mainstream news reports when Americans are the “provocative” ones (though the Iranians immediately accused the U.S. military of [just that](#), a provocation, when it came to the U.S. drone its Revolutionary Guard recently shot down [either](#) over Iranian air space or the Strait of Hormuz). When it comes to Washington’s never-ending war on terror, I think I can say with reasonable confidence that, in the past, the present, and the future, the one phrase you’re not likely to find in such media coverage will be “American aggression.”

I mean, forget the history of the second half of the last century and all of this one so far. Forget

that back in the Neolithic age of the 1980s, before Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein turned out to be the [new Adolf Hitler](#) and needed to be taken down by us (no aggression there), the administration of President Ronald Reagan actively backed his unprovoked invasion of, and war against, Iran. (That included his use of chemical weapons against Iranian troop concentrations that American military intelligence [helped him](#) target.) Forget that, in 2003, the administration of George W. Bush launched an unprovoked war of aggression against Iraq, based on [false intelligence](#) about Saddam's supposed weapons of mass destruction and his [supposed links](#) to al-Qaeda. Forget that the Trump administration [tore up](#) a nuclear agreement with Iran to which that country was adhering and which would indeed have effectively prevented it from producing nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future. Forget that its supreme leader (in [fatwas](#) he issued) prohibited the creation or stockpiling of such weaponry in any case.

Forget that the Trump administration, in a completely unprovoked manner, imposed crippling sanctions on that country and its oil trade, causing [genuine suffering](#), in hopes of toppling that regime economically as Saddam Hussein's had been toppled militarily in neighboring Iraq in 2003, all in the name of preventing the atomic weapons that the Obama-negotiated pact had taken care of. Forget the fact that an American president, who, at the last moment, [halted](#) air strikes against Iranian missile bases (after one of their missiles shot down that American drone) is [now promising](#) that an attack on "anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force... In some areas, overwhelming will mean obliteration."

Provocations? Aggression? Perish the thought!

And yet, just ask yourself what Washington and the Pentagon might do if an Iranian drone were spotted off the East Coast of the United States (no less in actual U.S. air space). No more need be said, right?

So here's the strange thing, on a planet on which, in 2017, U.S. Special Operations forces deployed to [149 countries](#), or approximately 75% of all nations; on which the U.S. has perhaps

[800 military garrisons](#) outside its own territory; on which the U.S. Navy patrols most of its oceans and seas; on which U.S. unmanned aerial drones [conduct](#) assassination strikes across a surprising range of countries; and on which the U.S. has been fighting wars, as well as more minor conflicts, for years on end from Afghanistan to Libya, Syria to Yemen, Iraq to Niger in a century in which it chose to launch full-scale invasions of two countries (Afghanistan and Iraq), is it truly reasonable never to identify the U.S. as an “aggressor” anywhere?

What you might say about the United States is that, as the self-proclaimed leading proponent of democracy and human rights (even if its president is now having a set of [love affairs](#) with autocrats and dictators), Americans consider ourselves at home just about anywhere we care to be on planet Earth. It matters little how we may be armed and what we might do. Consequently, wherever Americans are bothered, harassed, threatened, attacked, we are always the ones being provoked and aggressed upon, never provoking and aggressing. I mean, how can you be the aggressor in your own house, even if that house happens to be temporarily located in Afghanistan, Iraq, or perhaps soon enough in Iran?

A Planet of Aggressors and Provocateurs

To mine the same *New York Times* piece a little more, here's another paragraph:

“Some officials believe the United States needs [to] be willing to master the kind of deniable, shadowy techniques Tehran has perfected in order to halt Iran's aggressions. Others think that, while helpful, such clandestine attacks will not be enough to reassure American allies or deter Iran.”

Of course, such clandestine American attacks would, by definition, not be “aggression,” not given that they were directed against Iran. Forget the grim historical humor lurking in the above passage, since the present Iranian religious hard-liners probably wouldn't be there if, back in 1953, the CIA hadn't used [just such techniques](#) to overthrow a democratically elected Iranian government and install its own autocrat, the young Shah, in power.

As that *Times* piece also emphasizes, Iran now uses “proxy forces” throughout the region (indeed it does!) against U.S. (and Israeli) power, a tactic Americans evidently just hadn't thought about employing themselves in this century -- until now. Americans naturally have no proxy forces in the Greater Middle East. That's a well-known fact. Just out of curiosity, however, what would you call the local forces our special ops guys are [training](#) and advising in so many of those 149 countries around the planet, since obviously they could never be proxy forces? And how about the Afghan and Iraqi militaries that the U.S. [trained](#), supplied with weaponry, and advised in these years? (You know, the Iraqi army that [collapsed](#) in the face of ISIS in 2014 or the Afghan security forces that have been unable to staunch either the [growth](#) of the Taliban or of the [Afghan branch](#) of ISIS.)

Now, don't get me wrong. Yes, the Iranians can (and sometimes do) provoke and aggress. It's an ugly planet filled with aggression and provocation. (Take Vladimir Putin's Russia in Crimea and Ukraine, for instance.) The Chinese are now aggressing in the South China Sea where the U.S. Navy regularly conducts “freedom of navigation” operations -- though no provocation there, as the Pacific's an American lake, isn't it?

In short, when it comes to provocation and aggression, the world is our oyster. There are so many bad guys out there and then, of course, there's us. We can make mistakes and missteps, we can [kill](#) staggering numbers of [civilians](#), destroy [cities](#), uproot populations, create hordes of [refugees](#) with our never-ending wars across the Greater Middle East and Africa, but aggression? What are you thinking?

One thing is obvious if you follow the mainstream media: in our world, no matter what we do, we're still the good guys on a planet filled with provocateurs and aggressors of every sort.

War to the Horizon

Now let's think for a moment about that remarkable American comfort level, that unprecedented sense of being at home practically anywhere on Earth we choose to send

armed Americans -- and while we're at it, let's consider a related subject: America's wars.

If, in the early 1970s, you had told me or any other American that, in the nearly half-century to come, the U.S. would fight wars and other lesser conflicts of almost every imaginable sort in startling numbers of places thousands of miles from home, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, countries most Americans couldn't then (or now) find on a map, I guarantee you one thing: we would have thought you were nuts. (Of course, if you had described Donald Trump's White House to me then as our future reality, I would have considered you beyond delusional.)

And yet here we are. Think about Afghanistan for a moment. In those distant days of the last century, that country would undoubtedly have been known here only to small numbers of young adventurers eager to hike what was then called "[the hippy trail](#)." There, in a still remarkably peaceful place, a young American might have been greeted with remarkable friendliness and then spaced out on drugs.

That, of course, was before Washington's first (covert) Afghan War, the one the [CIA oversaw](#), with the help of Saudi money (yes, even then!) and a major hand from the Pakistani intelligence services. Do you remember that conflict, which began in 1979 and ended a decade later with the Red Army limping out of Kabul in defeat, heading for a land, the Soviet Union, which would implode within two years? What a "victory" that proved to be for America, not to speak of the [groups](#) of extremist Islamic militants we helped to fund and support, including a young Saudi named Osama bin Laden.

And keep in mind as well that that was our "short" war in Afghanistan, a mere decade long. In October 2001, soon after the 9/11 attacks, instead of launching a police action against Osama bin Laden and crew, the administration of George W. Bush decided to invade that country. Almost 18 years later, the U.S. military is [still fighting](#) there (remarkably unsuccessfully) against a thoroughly rejuvenated Taliban and a new branch of ISIS. It now qualifies as the [longest war](#) in our history (without even adding in that first Afghan War of ours).

And then, of course, there's Iraq. By my count, the U.S. has been involved in four conflicts involving that country, starting with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 and the ensuing war, which the administration of President Ronald Reagan supported militarily (as the present

one does the Saudi war in Yemen). Then there was President George H.W. Bush's war against Saddam Hussein after his military invaded Kuwait in 1990, which resulted in a resounding (but by no means conclusive) victory and the kind of victory parade in Washington that Donald Trump can only [dream of](#). Next, of course, was President George W. Bush's 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq ([mission accomplished](#) !), a grim and unsatisfying eight-year conflict from which President Barack Obama withdrew U.S. troops in 2011. The fourth war followed in 2014 when the U.S.-trained Iraqi military collapsed in the face of relatively small numbers of ISIS militants, a group that was

[an offshoot](#)

of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which didn't exist until the U.S. invaded that country.

[That September](#)

, President Obama loosed the U.S. air force on Iraq and Syria (so you can add a fifth war in a neighboring country to the mix) and sent U.S. troops back into Iraq and into Syria where they

[still](#)

[remain](#)

Oh, yes, and don't forget Somalia. U.S. troubles there began with the famed Black Hawk Down incident amid the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993 and never, in a sense, really ended. Today, U.S. Special Operations forces are [still on the ground](#) there and U.S. air strikes against a Somali militant Islamic group, al-Shabaab, have actually been

[on the rise](#)

in the Trump era.

As for Yemen, from the first U.S. drone strike there [in 2002](#), the U.S. had been in an on-again, off-again low-level conflict there that included commando raids, cruise missile attacks, air strikes, and drone strikes against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, another offshoot of the original al-Qaeda. Since, in 2015, the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates launched their war against Houthi rebels (backed by Iran) who had come to control significant parts of the country, the U.S. has been supporting them with

[weaponry](#)

, [intelligence, and targeting](#)

, as well as (until late last year)

[mid-air refueling](#)

and other aid. Meanwhile, that brutal war of destruction has led to staggering numbers of Yemeni civilian

[casualties](#)

(and

[widespread starvation](#)

), but as with so many of the other campaigns the U.S. has involved itself in across the Greater Middle East and Africa it shows no sign of ending.

And don't forget Libya, where the U.S. and NATO intervened in 2011 to help rebels [take down](#) Muammar Gaddafi, the local autocrat, and in the process managed to foster a failed state in a land now experiencing its

[own civil war](#)

. In the years since 2011, the U.S. has sometimes had commandos on the ground there, has launched

[hundreds](#)

of drone strikes (and air strikes), often against a branch of ISIS that grew up in that land. Once again, little is settled there, so we can all continue to sing the Marine Hymn ("...to the shores of Tripoli") with a sense of appropriateness.

And I haven't even mentioned [Pakistan](#) , [Niger](#) , and god knows where else. You should also note that the American forever *war on terror*

has proven a remarkably effective *war for terror*

, clearly helping to foster and spread such groups, aggressors and provocateurs all, around significant parts of the planet, from

[the Philippines](#)

to

[the Congo](#)

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Addicted to war? Not us. Still, all in all, it's quite a record and let's not forget that looming on the horizon is another possible war, this time with Iran, a country that the men overseeing the invasion of Iraq in 2003 ([including](#) present National Security Advisor [John Bolton](#)) were eager to go after even then. "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad," so the

[saying](#)

reputedly went in Washington at the time. "Real men want to go to Tehran." And it's just possible that, in 2019, Bolton and crew will be able to act on that much delayed urge.

Considering the history of American wars in these years, what could possibly go wrong?

To sum up, no one should ever claim that we Americans aren't "at home" in the world. We're everywhere, remarkably [well funded](#) and well armed and ready to face off against the aggressors and provocateurs of this planet. Just one small suggestion:

[thank the troops](#)

for their service if you want, and then, as most Americans do, go about your business as if nothing were happening in those distant lands. As we head into election season 2020, however, just don't imagine that we're the good guys on Planet Earth. As far as I can tell, there

aren't many good guys left.

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