

CHALMERS JOHNSON

"Things that can't go on forever, don't."



*Chalmers Johnson is a professor emeritus of political science from UC San Diego and president of the Japan Policy Research Institute. He served in the Navy during the Korean war and crossed the Pacific Ocean twice on a tiny boat which was prone to rolling and had a top speed of 10 knots. After a lifetime as a supporter of Cold War foreign policy, Johnson's most recent books *Blowback* (2000) and *Sorrows of Empire* (2004) present thorough criticisms of the United States' shift toward empire building and its repercussions of ongoing warfare and the loss of civil liberties.*

In 1967 Johnson was recruited by CIA director Richard Helms to work as a consultant for the agency. At the time, Johnson was a professor of political science at UC Berkeley defending the Vietnam War to a campus that was revolting against it. "The best reason to keep national intelligence estimates a secret, I once told my wife, was

their utter banality. Perhaps they were so highly classified because it would have been embarrassing to have it known that such conventional journalism passed for strategic thought in the Oval Office." During his work as a consultant, Johnson was surprised to find that the finest research of a billion dollar spying agency was on par with that of a graduate student thesis. Reading internal documents brought Johnson to the conclusion that the CIA could afford to be so terrible at information gathering and political analysis because its primary purpose was covert operations, employing violence and assassination to further American interests. Not long after Johnson's time there, Helms was convicted of lying under oath to Congress about the CIA's role in the coup against Chilean president Salvador Allende.

It was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union that Johnson became skeptical about the intentions of U.S. foreign policy. Without the threat of Communism, there seemed little reason for our military network around the world to exist and yet the funding and staffing of these bases continued, despite public outcry from many of the host countries. This led Johnson to ask whether the global expansion of U.S. military presence had ceased to be a preventative strategy and had become a goal in itself.

"Blowback" is a term used within the CIA to describe unintended consequences of covert actions abroad. For example during the 1980s, the U.S. armed and funded the Mujahideen in their defense against the Soviet attacks on Afghanistan. The Mujahideen went on to establish the notoriously oppressive Taliban government, the supposed enemy of our recent invasion of the country. Ahead of the times, in his book published in 2000, Johnson noted Osama bin Laden as another such case. Bin Laden — a former CIA operative who saw U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia as an affront to his religious beliefs — had at that point only been connected with the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

This interview was conducted by phone on President's Day. Johnson was at his home outside San Diego.

—Ben Bush

BHB: I've heard you speak of your travels to the U.S. military base in Okinawa as a turning point in your perspective on U.S. foreign policy. As you chronicled the expanding network of U.S. bases did you travel to any of the more recent outposts like Camp Bondsteel in Yugoslavia or the bases in Saudi Arabia?

CJ: I'm now 72 and I don't travel that well anymore but you're right to say that about my visit to Okinawa, the poorest of the Japanese prefectures. It is the most southerly island in the Japanese chain, very much a Japanese version of Puerto Rico. Seized by the Japanese empire late in the 19th century much in the way that we seized Puerto Rico during the Spanish American war and then always discriminated against on cultural grounds and used in recent times by the Japanese in order to maintain the security treaty with the United States. It has been used as a dumping ground for our troops, basing them out there where they would not be a bother to mainland Japanese, who certainly would not tolerate the sort of things that have gone on in Okinawa since the Battle of Okinawa in 1945.

In September 1995, an incident occurred in Okinawa that led to the greatest demonstration against the United States since the security treaty was signed. This was the rape of a 12-year-old Okinawan girl. She was abducted, beaten and raped by two marines and a sailor. The governor of Okinawa invited me to address his staff on the issues of the Status of Forces Agreement, which deals with the protection of American troops when charged with extremely serious crimes such as this.

I was simply shocked by the impact of 38 American military bases on an island smaller than Kauai in the Hawaiian islands with 1.3 million citizens. Forced to live next door to our war planes, to our bases; to encounter crimes, bar brawls, environmental pollution, noise pollution – one thing after another. The rate of sexually violent crimes by soldiers leading court martial in Okinawa is two per month and this average has been main-

tained for well over 50 years.

As I began to do research on the base world, on our 725 bases around the world, I began to discover that Okinawa was not unique. It was, in fact, typical of our huge bases in Germany, Italy, in the Persian Gulf and in Japan itself and in South Korea, where we have created probably the most anti-American democracy on earth today because of the presence of 101 American bases that have been there since the Korean War. All of this led me into investigating our military apparatus and its impact on our country.

B: Your book *Blowback* received a lot of attention after 9-11. What made you feel compelled to write a follow-up?

CJ: There's no question that the September 11th attacks were the biggest example in history of blowback, of retaliation for American foreign policy actions. And our reaction, which seemed to be, above all, an overly militarized reaction, is one of the strategies of terrorism. One of the things it hopes to elicit is a military over-reaction that tends to generate more active terrorists and of course more passive supporters for them.

In his "long hard slog" memorandum of October 2003, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld said that we lack a "metric" — he means "measure" but he rarely says what he means — of how we're doing in the war on terrorism. Actually, we've got a pretty good metric: between 1993 and 2001 — eight years — al Qaeda, under Osama bin Laden, carried out five major bombing attacks worldwide. Since that time, down to and including the suicide attacks in Istanbul, against the HSBC bank and the British consulate, they've carried out seventeen. Clearly, terrorism has been made worse by our actions — I mean specifically the use of our extremely high-tech military to attack an extremely poor country like Afghanistan — where the bombing amounted to basically just shaking up the rubble.

We know a lot about terrorism. That is,

technically it is understood as an attack against the innocent in order to draw attention to the sins of the invulnerable and those who can't be attacked. The way to deal with terrorism is to realize that you must separate the activist, those who are actually going out and doing the deed, including suicide bombers, from passive supporters — that is, the broad mass of people living in Islamic countries in the case of al Qaeda. You must be responsive to their legitimate grievances and alter your foreign policy in order to cause them to believe that you are genuinely trying to deal with their problems.

My book *Sorrows of Empire* sets out to describe the size of the American military, its 725 bases in other people's countries — that 's the official figure from the Pentagon. The actual number is significantly higher. I believe that the unit of this modern empire is the military base in the way older empires involved colonies. Militarism is maintained in large part by secrecy. Forty percent of the defense budget — which is monstrous in terms of other expenditures of our government — is being kept totally secret and has been since the Manhattan Project. It's impossible for congress, even if it were honest, to do oversight on that.

BHB: In the chapter "Whatever Happened to Globalization?" you show Bush-style military dominance interfering with Clinton-style economic dominance, portraying them both as negative. In a situation like China's, a country which does a tremendous amount of manufacturing for American — or perhaps more accurately multinational — corporations, what has changed in the era of American unilateralism in which the administration portrays China as the enemy and is constantly goading it toward confrontation?

CJ: Well, I think it's one of the fundamental contradictions of our policy towards the country that is emerging as probably the most capitalistic on Earth. That doesn't mean it's a democracy. The two don't necessarily go together despite our ideology. China grew economically at 9.1% last year. That is

easily the fastest rate among all large economies — it's well on it's way toward becoming a super-power within a matter of decades. In fact one of the most fundamental issues of international relations in the 21st century is whether the established powers, particularly the United States but also Japan, can adjust to the emergence of legitimate sources of new power and influence. China is an utterly commercial country; Communism is as dead as it could be anywhere. The Fortune 500 loves investing in China and indeed today anything can be manufactured in China cheaper than it can be anywhere else. As a Hong Kong joke has it: "China just had a couple of bad centuries and now it's back."

I included this chapter on globalization just to draw attention to what a radical departure the "war party" is taking, by which I mean the party of the current administration. I argue that Bill Clinton was actually a more effective imperialist than George Bush simply because he was able to disguise, even camouflage, America's attempts to maintain hegemony over the world under the economic doctrine, or at least a kind of spurious ersatz doctrine, called globalization, which suggested that sooner or later through the mysteries of free trade, the very poor countries of the world that we are exploiting would some way or another begin to grow. Not a one of them has but that was the promise.

George Bush just drops the veil, he just comes along bluntly with a list of 50 to 60 countries in which he and Vice President Cheney would like to bring about a regime change — a typical term of theirs — and of course using military force to do it. This is utterly destructive of the kinds of things inherent in globalization and the use of economic influence because it destroys the trust on which free trade is based. Our sort of rogue behavior under the Bush administration — calling for preventative war and arming well beyond our ability to even pay for it, has alarmed the rest of the world. It is to the point where you can almost see what the Romans used to speak of — that

gathering world of enemies out there. We are disliked everywhere today and everyone is trying to think of ways to restrain or retaliate against us or help push us further toward our own decline.

To take just one example: without doubt, the Bush administration has provided one of the greatest impetuses for nuclear proliferation we've ever seen. Virtually the entire rest of the world is now saying, "What was wrong with Hussein was not that he had weapons but that he didn't have them." So long as he didn't have them the United States could bully him, treat the Iraqi population in an extremely destructive and ultimately criminal way. Whereas North Korea, which we have every reason to believe has a small minimal deterrent capability, we are approaching much more carefully. This will lead other nations around the world to believe they must be prepared in the same way if the American juggernaut starts putting them on a list.

Take as a concrete example a country like Brazil: at one time they had an incipient nuclear weapons program which they abandoned after we encouraged them to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. I am reasonably certain that President Lula Da Silva must now ask his advisors in the greatest of privacy, "How long would it take you to revive the program if it should turn out that the Americans start to come after us? Particularly as we increasingly do not go along with their economic schemes to keep us in a subordinate position and as a dumping ground for the products produced by their multinational corporations."

It's in that sense that I felt the issue of globalization was directly relevant to an understanding of the imperialism and militarism I'm talking about as it is part of a more traditional kind of imperialism that the United States has carried out for a long time.

And I wouldn't want to suggest either that all of American imperialism has necessarily been bad. Since the end of World War II we have worked to build a structure of international law of agreements among truly diverse cultures on common

and accepted practices in everything from nuclear weapons to trade law. I'm not trying for a minute to suggest that this body of law was equitable but it was rooted in the United Nations and it did produce global acquiescence. We pioneered the use of foreign aid and things like the Fulbright program to bring scholars to America to study. There was much greater reliance on diplomacy than we see today, with the almost total displacement of the State Department by the Department of Defense. That was also part of our legacy that is being destroyed by the Bush administration.

BHB: During the build-up to the war in Iraq there was a lot of opposition from prominent E.U. nations. Do you see the E.U. as a counterbalance to U.S. actions or as a NAFTA-like force which works to the benefit of corporations by reducing trade barriers so that jobs can move to the regions with the lowest wages? Jobs manufacturing products for the wealthy French market can now be moved to the former eastern bloc countries where wages are much lower.

CJ: Well, certainly it's a bit of both. The stance of France and Germany was heroic and important. The status of the E.U. is complex because it's having great difficulty coming together on common rules for the big countries, for example France and Germany, as contrasted with the little countries. It probably has expanded too fast into the old ex-Soviet satellites of East Europe that are extremely poor countries. But at the same time we also have to acknowledge that an unintended consequence of the leadership of Britain simply ignoring the will of its public opinion democratically expressed is that there will simply be no British influence on the continent for decades if ever again. Britain is now thoroughly identified as a satellite of the United States in the eyes of Europeans.

The other thing that complicates the E.U. is the dubious status today of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which was a defensive alliance created to defend Europe against the

Soviet Union. Since the Soviet Union no longer exists, it is arguable that that alliance is now coming apart of its own weight but we continue to try to prop it up and use it as a device both to control the E.U. and for our own purposes in assisting our overstretched military around the world.

I would generally say that given the trend of events, the policies of the Bush administration have done more to unite Europe than anything that has been done up until now. A united Europe constitutes an economic and potentially even military force as great or greater than the United States. I don't actually expect the E.U. to ever to turn into a major military force simply because of the very considerable aging of the population and the fact that it is opposed to war. And I wish that unity were more advanced.

BHB: In *Blowback* you comment: "The need to raise incomes in the developing world to maintain adequate levels of global demand must also be recognized. Since this almost surely cannot (and probably should not) be done by attempting to institutionalize some version of labor rights on a global scale, the United States should establish some minimum wage levels for the manufacture of goods that are to be exported to our market." What do you see as the dangers of institutionalizing global labor rights? Would it just destabilize currency in a variety of places?

CJ: I have no doubt that it would have these effects. My own feeling is that as you exploit cheap labor abroad, you must attempt to make that labor less cheap on grounds that sooner or later, if you're going to keep manufacturing all these things, somebody has to be able to buy them. If you take jobs away in America in order to manufacture in China or Bangladesh or wherever else then there's nobody back in America who can buy them but you can't sell them in China or Bangladesh because the people there live too close to subsistence levels. As Herb Stein once put it, when he was chairman of the council of economic advisors, "Things that can't go on forever, don't."

Well, this can't go on forever and one way to begin to equalize these things is to start stressing the requirement that companies that do relocate to India or China pay wages that are at least slightly comparable with those that occur in rich countries.

BHB: In the October 2002, Chechen secessionists took several hundred hostages in the Moscow Opera House. Afterwards the Russian government frequently compared the incident to September 11th in order to depict their pre-existing war in Chechnya as an anti-terrorist operation. Both Chechnya and Afghanistan are strategically important locations for building a pipeline to export oil reserves near the Caspian Sea. Do you see this as an alliance between the U.S. and Russia working together to fight terrorists or are they using a similar justification to compete for the same oil rich resources around the Caspian Sea?

CJ: Well, I'm not sure that it should be put as that stark of a dichotomy. But I basically agree with the thrust of your remarks. These incidents are being used for expansionist policies and there is no question that the oil that has opened up in the now independent countries around the Caspian Sea is a magnet to the rest of the world.

We're not simply talking here about the manipulation of symbols or the military petroleum complex because Chechnya does represent one of the fundamental contradictions of the new Russia, which pretends to no longer be the Soviet empire, but still insists that Russia include countries that have utterly diverse religious and historical traditions such as Chechnya or Dagestan or Azerbaijan or Georgia or any of these places that are now being contested.

At the same time I believe that it is only logical that the Russians must be alarmed by the very rapid American penetration of this area, which includes building bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the desire to build bases in Azerbaijan. A recent CIA coup carried out a forced regime change in Georgia to bring to power a gov-

ernment that we could manipulate better.

Most Americans don't realize that Jim Baker, the former Secretary of State and Republican guru, and his law firm Baker Botts have an office in Baku, Azerbaijan. Having visited that city I can tell you there isn't much law business there. What that's there for is the tremendous profits that American oil majors hope to make as they exploit the oil from the Caspian basin and try to move it to markets in Europe and in America and perhaps China without going through Russia.

But I think at the same time there is no question that Prime Minister Putin uses the threat in Chechnya and terrorist activities within Russia itself for the purposes of his own militaristic policies. I suspect that he will be no more successful than Ariel Sharon in Palestine or the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq in pursuing similar kinds of very hard-line militaristic policies.

BHB: During the war in Afghanistan the U.S. made ties with Pakistan in order to use its military bases. What do you see as the implication of this in the nuclear stand-off between Pakistan and India?

CJ: Well, obviously neither country should have produced nuclear weapons without our even knowing anything about it. When they tested them in 1998 it was another in a now long line of catastrophic failures of American intelligence. You'd have been better informed if you had simply abolished the CIA and just paid attention to what was being reported on the BBC. But it is a very, very unstable area of the world and moreover, our actions are creating precedents that could be followed there. A nuclear war in that part of the world – any nuclear war would be catastrophically destabilizing, but this one would be horrific, the loss of life would be fantastic and yet here we are in the unusual position of having to defend a military officer who illegally carried out a military coup and set himself up as “President” Musharraf in Pakistan and who does have nuclear weapons as well as a degree of nuclear blackmail over us.

What this requires is the utmost kind of careful attention to detail; people with immense experience in these cultures, who know the people involved well and can carry out genuine diplomatic conversation. Instead what we have is the growing displacement of the state department by uniformed military officers. The money allocated in our budget right now for foreign affairs goes 93% to Pentagon and only 7% to the State Department. Our people are so inexperienced and naive that they believe their own propaganda. They now seem amazed at the revelation that Pakistan has been supplying atomic technology to Libya and North Korea and other places while we've been defending everything that Musharraf says and does; meanwhile, India is moving in a much more nationalistic direction than it had been in the past, and I can't do anything more than say it's an alarming situation that demands the most careful attention.

BHB: You have said recently that the U.S. has bungled the situation in Iraq so badly that we can't leave or stay. If we stay resentment against the U.S. simmers and American soldiers continue to die and if we leave the country erupts into civil war. What do you see as the factors contributing to that scenario and do you see any way out?

CJ: Well, right now, contrary to the intelligence put out or invented by the Neo-Conservatives, we are in a full-blown quagmire in Iraq. Today many healthy, serious, young Iraqi men, regard it as their responsibility, their family responsibility, and a matter of honor to attempt to kill easily identifiable foreign invaders, just as happened in Vietnam. Moreover, with the capture of Hussein, they feel that they are no longer stooges for the old government but merely Iraqi patriots. One can virtually guarantee that so long as we stay there casualties — which are now running above 530 — will continue to mount.

At the same time, everyone with even a modicum of knowledge about Iraq knows that this was never a real country. There is no Iraqi nation, there are three separate groups that were artifi-

cially combined out of the old empire left by British imperialism at the end of the first World War and the place could only be held together by a strongman like Saddam Hussein. When you think of Iraq you should compare it to Stalin's Russia, which also did not hold together once the Stalinist system collapsed. Iraq was a place to avoid and now we've got ourselves trapped in it.

If we pursue our democratic rhetoric the Shi'ite population, which is the largest, will come to power and that would greatly alarm both the Sunni Muslims in central Iraq and the Kurds in the North because there are very fundamental religious differences there. It would very likely instill adventurous thoughts in the minds of the Iranians who are also Shi'ite Muslims. Any attempt at independence by the Kurds will so seriously alarm Turkey that it would almost certainly intervene. The Turkish genocide against the Kurdish population inside and outside of eastern Turkey has been going on for years, financed by our arms manufacturers. Which is to say, one of the more straightforward and logical predictions in international relations is that if the Americans just cut and leave, you're going to get a civil war in Iraq in which Iraq will not survive. Also very possibly the surrounding nations will be drawn in and produce a real regional conflagration.

So how is this going to be resolved? I assume that we wander along down the path we're going, casualties continue to mount, the public becomes alarmed, we have a full-blown Watergate in another two or three months as the depths of the duplicity of the administration are further revealed. An electoral change occurs. It doesn't matter who defeats George Bush; what matters is the terms under which he we decide to cut our losses and get out of Iraq. We would hope by then that enough power had been transferred to the UN security council to imagine some kind of orderly process of the break-up of Iraq into three areas. And then, if they do become independent enclaves that they be defended by an international court from Iranian intrusion against the Kurds.

This is a quagmire of major proportions and undoubtedly the United States will ultimately leave Iraq the way it did in Vietnam, with its tail between its legs.