

THE CONSEQUENCES OF EMPIRE

How 'Blowback' & Militarism Are Destroying Our Economy



Who is Chalmers Johnson? He is a Navy veteran of the Korean War, a longtime cold warrior who now repents his former approval of the Vietnam War, an expert on Asia, and a critic of the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier sometimes anchored in San Diego Harbor, where a mistake holds the potential of reducing the country's eighth-largest city to atomic dust. Johnson has served the CIA as a consultant. As part of his varied academic career he ran the Center for Chinese Studies at University of California, Berkeley, for many years. Looking back, he explains his take on the Vietnam War as a consequence of his orientation at the time: "I knew too much about the international communist movement, and not enough about the United States government and its Department of Defense." Johnson has traced each proximate cause several steps back and distilled his findings into a book entitled The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic. Today Johnson is an inspiration to students who probe the politically incorrect subject of "American Empire." A new book, Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic, is now being readied for press.

Chalmers Johnson

ACRES U.S.A. Your most recent book has the subtitle, "Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic." Would you explain that a little bit?

JOHNSON. That's what the book is about — the United States has, since 1940 down to the present, either been engaged in war or totally prepared for war. The costs of this state of affairs show up over time. It has led our country to militarism, that is, the military as a way of life, as a way of making a living, as a way of profit. It *doesn't* mean national security. The Department of Defense has very little to do with the defense of the country — it has much more to do with buying weapons that nobody uses. They're not even particularly good. Over time this militarism has had very negative consequences. According to one count done by the Federation of American Scientists, we've used military force in other people's countries 201 times since the beginning of World War II, and in most cases, we were the instigator of the use of force. We have never

once implemented or succeeded in creating democratic institutions with this approach, despite the talk of our current President, who surely has not distinguished himself for a knowledge of history, particularly the history of his own country. This leads the rest of the world to believe that we are an imperialist power, a new Rome, an out-of-control military society fully determined to dominate the rest of the world.

ACRES U.S.A. Yet the majority of Americans wouldn't go along with such a program. How has it come to this?

JOHNSON. Among the ways that this is put over on the American people is secrecy — that is, the so-called imperial presidency, the fact that everything our most powerful institutions do, from the budget on down, is secret from the public. Forty percent of the defense budget is "black," that is, secret. It is even secret from virtually all members of Congress, meaning that the money can be allocated by military officers of the Pentagon

without any form of oversight. This is what we mean by the imperial presidency. The separation of powers, the balance of powers that we built so carefully into the structure of the American republic, has been knocked out of balance. Today the Congress is almost totally worthless, even though the founders of our country regarded it as the key institution. Today, the combination of militarism and the secrecy which eliminates the possibility of effective oversight adds up in my view to a real danger to the Republic, meaning the structure of government that we implemented in the Constitution of 1789.

ACRES U.S.A. In the last part of the 1950s, just before he left office, Eisenhower injected about \$55 billion into the economy that he had no right to inject based on profits and savings. Was that the beginning, in your opinion, or do you have any other milestone that you'd like to single out?

JOHNSON. I think it goes back to 1950 to the NSC 68 document, that's the National Security Council document 68, which has finally been released to the public. It was a grand strategy for the United States in the Cold War. Paul Nitze, the primary author, has now indicated that one of the considerations in launching the Cold War was what we call "military Keynesism" — that is, many people in 1950 believed that the Great Depression was likely to recur in the United States and that the United States had overcome the collapse and demand associated with the Great Depression only because of the arms spending during World War II. These people thus believed that economic security could be assured with renewed arms spending. We have now spent ourselves virtually into bankruptcy. To take just one statistic: between the Manhattan Project and today, we've spent well over \$5 trillion

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on nuclear weapons. These are perfect examples of Keynesian make-work — they've never once been used, even though we threaten to use them all the time. I certainly applaud the courage of President Eisenhower in his farewell address, in defining the phrase "military industrial complex" and warning us about it. Nonetheless, Eisenhower built the military industrial complex — he's the one who got it launched. It was only as he was leaving office that he took the trouble to tell us that it was a mistake. I am therefore not quite the enthusiast for Eisenhower that some younger contemporary writers are.

ACRES U.S.A. That emphasis on military spending is in effect what started us on the Roman road to ruin — is that the point you're making?

JOHNSON. I believe so. One of the things I would want to stress today is the degree to which we have become dependent on military spending. One of the most interesting phenomena in our lives, starting in the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, is the public reaction to military base closings by the Pentagon. It is perfectly logical for the Pentagon to shut down bases — we have literally hundreds of them that we no longer need — but as soon as it happens, you get an uproar from local politicians, "Oh, my God! Save our bases!" There are jobs there. The military industrial complex is very much aware of this.

In a really big project like the B-2 bomber, they'll put a piece of it in as many congressional districts as they possibly can — certainly one in every state. Then, if a member of Congress gets the idea that we don't need yet another weapon of mass destruction, the Pentagon can close down the plant in his district or potentially put him out of business in the next election — at any rate, punish him. One good example of this attitude is from the State of Washington, which has two very pleasant women senators, both well-educated, liberal people who work hard. All you have to do is say "Boeing" to them and they turn into fascist hyenas before your very eyes. They would do anything in their power to keep Boeing healthy, working, and making weapons of mass destruction.

ACRES U.S.A. But this whole structure is based on one thing, isn't it — the constant debt expansion, doubling and redoubling of the public and private debt?

JOHNSON. That is precisely why in my next book, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, one of the main themes is that we are flirting with bankruptcy, just like numerous empires in the past, with imperial overextension and unused military apparatus that is well beyond any rational need to defend the country. We don't manufacture that much in this country anymore. We've hollowed out our domestic manufacturing except for one area: we are easily — by orders of magnitude — the largest single weapons manufacturer on earth today, and we sell weapons to practically anybody who wants them. This is not private enterprise. It's done through foreign military sales, inside the Pentagon. We like to pretend that the arms industry

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is capitalism, but it isn't. It has only one customer, and the industry is extremely concentrated. The U.S. government encourages mergers, so that we get companies like Lockheed Martin, McDonnell Douglas and Northrop Grumman — old manufacturers that have been forcibly merged, actually with great financial incentives by the Pentagon. It really adds up to a form of state socialism in which the people making the decisions are in a continuous process of circulation from the Pentagon to the boards of these big contractors. I think that's what we're talking about here as a threat to the Republic. It is interesting to me how much discussion there is in the press today of these issues, part of it prompted by the revolt of the retired generals against Secretary Rumsfeld, but also by an increasing awareness that the President virtually proclaimed that he is today an elected king, that he can do

“Between the Manhattan Project and today, we've spent well over \$5 trillion on nuclear weapons. These are perfect examples of Keynesian make-work — they've never once been used, even though we threaten to use them all the time.”

anything he wants to. When he signs legislation, he appends statements that he doesn't regard this law as applying to him, but these so-called signing statements are not mentioned anywhere in our constitutional law. Meanwhile the judiciary is increasingly marginalized, and for reasons that no one fully understands, the Congress has become simply unable to function in any way like it was intended to.

ACRES U.S.A. Where's the court in all this?

JOHNSON. Its nature is to preserve itself — only deal with constitutional cases, and it's well understood that it must operate within political limits. The court is not the organization that is going to check the imperial presidency — that would have to be the Congress.

ACRES U.S.A. We act like an imperial power, but we don't actually have colonies in the traditional sense.

JOHNSON. That's part of the argument of my work — that it's still empire; it's still forcible hegemony of one country over another. The unit is no longer the colony — now it's the military base. According to the Pentagon's own count, we currently have 737 American military bases located in other countries. This situation has no rational relationship to national security at all. It affords a way of life for a lot of people and a way of making a living for a lot of other people, but there's no question that it adds up to imperialism. It recalls the end of the old Roman Republic, which also dominated the Mediterranean world through a series of military bases — in fact in the Persian Gulf, it had roughly the same number that we have there now.

ACRES U.S.A. But the military's been used as an engine of credit, the way we look at it.

JOHNSON. I think that's quite true. It's a peculiar institution that we have in America. We used to always think of our military as a citizen army, but it hasn't been a citizen army since 1973. There is no obligation of citizenship to serve in the armed forces — or even to defend the country — like there was when I was in the Navy in the Korean War. It's a professional military today. It's a way of life. It has increasingly been a route of social mobility for people facing dead ends, although these numbers have declined as a result of the Iraq War. People would like to improve themselves, but not necessarily at the expense of being killed for dubious reasons.

ACRES U.S.A. What's this doing to our social structure, our freedoms?

JOHNSON. That's certainly one of the issues that has motivated me to get involved in this. I've now written three books of an inadvertent trilogy on the dangers of American militarism. I was a cold warrior — I certainly thought the Soviet Union was a menace. I believe that there was a logic to our activities in the Cold War. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, imploded — Russia today is a much smaller place than the old Soviet Union used to be — I expected a genuine peace dividend, that we would begin to draw back from the huge global apparatus that we had of intruding into everybody else's business. Once the Soviet Union disappeared, so did the entire rationale for the Cold War operation. The thing that startled me, that made me wake up as a professor of international relations, was how we instantaneously, in an almost unthinking manner, sent out a search to find a replacement enemy. It was going to be China or drugs or terrorism or instability or something, but what was not contemplated was reducing the size of the world's largest military establishment. In America we spend 50 percent of *all the rest of the globe's* spending on military affairs. That led me to question why. What happened? Was the Cold War in fact a cover for a more deep and fundamental commitment to empire, probably going back to the end of World War II? It does seem that something like that was at work, and this leads us into the comparative study of empires, which collapse with great regularity. It took 300 years for the Roman Empire to succumb, as its leaders put it, to “the world of enemies,” but the collapse of empire is coming with the speed of FedEx these days. In my lifetime I've seen the collapse of the Nazi, Imperial Japanese, British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Soviet empires. If you and I were talking in 1985, and I said to you that four years from now the Soviet Union would disappear, you'd have thought, “This is not really a reliable guy — he's probably daydreaming,” but now it's gone.

ACRES U.S.A. And it happened very rapidly.

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JOHNSON. It happened very rapidly, and for roughly the same kind of reasons that are causing our decline today — imperial overstretch, inability to reform in economic institutions, a growing rigidity in and overly great influence on ideology. What I'm arguing here is that both protagonists in the Cold War overextended themselves. We are the last to go because we were always richer than the Soviet Union was, but it's a trap we've gotten ourselves into, and I'm afraid it may in fact be too late.

ACRES U.S.A. When they built the Suez Canal, Egypt ended up financing a good chunk of it and wasn't able to do so, so they borrowed the money from England. When Egypt couldn't repay the debt, England ended up taking over the country. Is that the kind of thing that's going to happen to us when finally nobody will accept our paper and we can't pay them back?

JOHNSON. Today we have the world's largest trade deficit, the largest single trade deficit ever recorded. We have monumental fiscal deficits in the government — we are a nation that more or less doesn't save anything, and we've allowed our manufacturing capabilities to decline radically. The danger is that our future will be that of Argentina, once the richest country in Latin America, and now, as a result of incompetent economic management, they're facing bankruptcy.

ACRES U.S.A. If we go into receivership as a nation, who's going to be the receiver? Is it going to be the military or somebody else?

JOHNSON. These are the complex issues that require speculation. I do not see the political system actually reversing the situation, largely because of the inability of Congress to perform in any correct manner. I live in the 50th district of California, where we've just experienced the resignation of our member of Congress, Republican Randy "Duke" Cunningham, for the greatest bribery case in the history of the country. Of course, the bribes came from the military industrial complex. Cunningham was a member of both the Appropria-

tions Committee, the Subcommittee of Defense Appropriations and the Intelligence Committee, and he was being paid off in lavish gifts — houses and things like that — by defense contractors. You know, if you saw somebody sliding into home base who pulled out a thousand-dollar bill and offered it to the umpire, you'd call that a bribe. Well, that's done all the time in the U.S. Congress, but we call it a "campaign contribution," and it's technically legal — except Cunningham went too far, and he accepted things like a Rolls-Royce car and furniture and other stuff. But the point is that when we've reached that kind of condition — I don't think the political system is capable of reversing things. The public could very well pull them in, but I still don't see a general mobilization simply because of the tremendous difficulty in getting information with the main media controlled by corporate conglomerates. My anticipated conclusion of all this is probably bankruptcy — when the rest of the world gets tired of financing our wars and maintaining our level of living.

ACRES U.S.A. Have you given any thought to whether the institutional arrangements — political and otherwise — could withstand that type of a collapse?

JOHNSON. They would certainly be put under enormous pressure and, unless it was explained very carefully, the collapse would have a tendency to discredit them. I don't think the republic, the form of government that was created by our Founding Fathers, is in disrepute — it has simply been undercut. It depended on, above all, a balance of power within the government, a prevention of the concentration of power in any one single institution, whether it be the presidency or the Congress or for that matter the judiciary — they were all to be divided. What we would have to do is reconstitute that separation of powers, but it would virtually take a revolution to reconstitute it. I can't imagine many presidents of either party who could actually bring the military industrial complex or the secret intelligence agencies under democratic control. I think it's simply too late. They're too institutionalized and the system has come to depend on them — and

they are totally secret. Even if you are an honest congressman — and that's fairly rare — and wanted to maintain oversight on the black budget within the Department of Defense, you simply can't do it. You can't get the information.

ACRES U.S.A. But what happens when total bankruptcy sweeps the country?

JOHNSON. It's hard to know what would happen then — whether we would have an orgy of blaming people or whether we would try to reconstitute what is a unique political document, namely the American Constitution. On the other hand, it's not just the current administration by any means that has caused these problems. This has been building throughout the rise of the warfare state, going back to the 1940s. When we talk about the black budget — that is the budget that is simply off the books — that's not something invented by the Bush administration, it started with the Manhattan Project during World War II to build atomic bombs. What I fear is that we are now beginning to pay the costs.

ACRES U.S.A. Will it cause us to take our bases out of Germany and out of South Korea and places like that?

JOHNSON. It's more than likely that the so-called host countries will ask us to do so. They've been doing so anyway. But certainly we won't be able to afford an armed force of the sort that we have today — which again, is not particularly effective for national security. That's why we've created another department entirely called "Homeland Security." Nobody's ever quite explained why we need a Department of Homeland Security when we've got a Defense Department that's costing half a trillion dollars a year.

ACRES U.S.A. One other question that's occurred to a lot of us is where is the CIA in all this?

JOHNSON. I was a consultant to the Office of National Estimates of the CIA between 1967 and 1973, so I do have some inside knowledge of it. The CIA is the private army of the President. That's how it should be understood. Since the

National Security Act was passed in 1947 — when Truman was president — no president, once he discovered that he had at his command a private army that was totally without oversight except his personally, has ever failed to use it. I argue in my current book that neither the United States nor the rest of the world will ever know peace so long as the Central Intelligence Agency still exists in its current form. As I say, it's a private army of the President. It is not particularly an intelligence agency as much as it is a military covert-operation agency.

ACRES U.S.A. But it's not very effective, is it, when it posits nonexistent weapons of mass destruction in a country that's been under surveillance for nine years?

JOHNSON. We'd have to ask the question, effective at what? It has been extremely effective at overthrowing foreign, often democratically elected, governments that irritate one or another group within the United States, going back to our overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadeq in Iran back in 1953 in order to serve the interests of the British Petroleum Company.

ACRES U.S.A. Would Allende from Chile be in that group?

JOHNSON. Certainly! Richard Helms — the only director of the CIA ever to be cited and convicted of a felony — when asked in Congress directly whether the CIA had anything to do with the overthrow of Salvador Allende and bringing to power in Chile one of the most despicable military leaders anywhere on earth, namely General Pinochet, Helms said no. He was tried and convicted for lying to Congress because the CIA had everything to do with it — the details are now well-known. But the CIA has been reasonably effective at that kind of thing, at state terrorism and things of this sort. It's a fairly despicable organization, but it's considered handy for the President to have a kind of sleazy gang of trained assassins at his disposal.

ACRES U.S.A. They've been accused of actually piloting dope into the United States. Is there anything to that?

JOHNSON. I think there's every reason to believe that the CIA did help fund Ronald Reagan's counter-revolutionaries in Nicaragua through the sale of crack cocaine in the United States.

ACRES U.S.A. Did the CIA have any idea the Soviet Union was going to collapse?

“Even if you are an honest congressman and wanted to maintain oversight on the black budget within the Department of Defense, you simply can't do it. You can't get the information.”

JOHNSON. That was one of the points made by the late Senator Moynihan in his investigations of the CIA, when he asked, in effect, who needs this \$32 billion-per-annum intelligence agency that couldn't even detect that its single most important reason for being, our primary opponent, the Soviet Union, was coming apart economically? In the 1980s, you could have found more accurate information on the Soviet Union in *Harpers* magazine than by reading so-called secret intelligence. More recently, most of the so-called secret intelligence on Iraq was totally incompetent and was essentially fawning attempts by the CIA to placate and ingratiate itself with the Bush administration. No, the record of the CIA is not particularly good. Its origin goes back to the National Intelligence Act of 1947, and its official stated purpose was to prevent surprise attacks such as the one that occurred in Pearl Harbor in 1941. It was set up as an intelligence agency. The word “central” referred to the fact that much of the intelligence available in 1941 that could have warned against the Japanese attack was deeply separated. It was in no way coordinated and brought to the President in such a way that a decision could be made. We know, for example, that the FBI in Honolulu observed the Japanese Consul burning documents in his back yard days before Pearl Harbor. This was communicated to J. Edgar Hoover, but he didn't tell anybody else about it. So the idea of the Central Intelligence Agency

was to bring together the data from all the diverse information-collecting agencies of the United States government and to coordinate it. It seemed like a good idea — except that in the stated purposes of the CIA, the last one is simply, “and any other activities the President may decide” to give to them. That's what led to the clandestine services, dirty tricks,

overthrowing of governments, selling of cocaine or whatever. Things like that became the route to rapid advancement within the CIA, the best career path, whereas the intelligence services have never particularly flourished and have never particularly done a good job.

ACRES U.S.A. What are you doing to position yourself correctly for what you see directly ahead?

JOHNSON. Well, I'm 75 years old. I'm not going anywhere, but I do think it's a serious question for a young or even middle-aged person with children to contemplate the kind of pressures that are going to be put on the United States almost certainly, as the consequences of our foreign policy for the last 50 years come back to haunt us. It will not be an easy time for the United States at all. At a bare minimum, a collapse of the American economic system would mean a global recession. It probably would not last that long for the rest of the world — probably at least a year — but the rest of the world could regain its composure, particularly with China as the world's fastest-growing economy at well over 10 percent a year. But in the United States it would mean the loss of control of our society. We would become dependent on favors from other rich countries, and we would have to learn to cultivate countries like China and India.

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ACRES U.S.A. In the wake of events discussed in your *Blowback* book, that would be a little difficult, wouldn't it?

JOHNSON. I believe it would be. I fear that the rest of the world would be no more concerned about the collapse of the United States than they were in 1991 at the collapse of the former U.S.S.R. They were interested, curious, some people attempted to exploit it, but there certainly was not any great worrying about the end of the Soviet experiment or that

have been Chilean terrorists, since September 11 is a date well known in Latin America, even though it meant nothing to Americans at the time. September 11, 1973, was the day on which the United States overthrew the elected government of Chile in favor of Augusto Pinochet. It could also have been Okinawans. We have 37 military bases on that small island in southern Japan, and hatred against the United States is simply endemic there. It could have been Greece — there is probably no

to the overthrow of the Iranian government by our government in 1953, leading to the installation of the Shah of Iran, in turn fueling the revolution in 1979 and the coming to power of the Islamic fundamentalists, and then the war with Iraq during the 1980s, an extremely bloody affair in which we openly backed Saddam Hussein. This is an old story of people who were at one time our allies, then lost their usefulness, so we decided to demonize and get rid of them.

ACRES U.S.A. Having said that much, that leads us straight into your next book. Could you give us a little précis of what you have there?

“If you saw somebody sliding into home base who pulled out a thousand-dollar bill and offered it to the umpire, you'd call that a bribe. Well, that's done all the time in the U.S. Congress, but we call it a 'campaign contribution.'”

it made a great deal of difference in the world. I think that “blowback” is an important term — it's a CIA term that means retaliation for things our government has done abroad, things that were kept totally secret from the American public, so that when the retaliation comes, they're unprepared for it, they have no way to put it in context to see cause and effect.

ACRES U.S.A. Which would include the 9/11 attacks, would it not?

JOHNSON. There is no question that the greatest single incidence of blowback in modern times was the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. But the explanation wasn't to be found in our President rather limply and weirdly asking, “Why do they hate us?” The real question in context was *who is it that doesn't hate us?* I remember on that September 11, I was talking with my publisher. Her office is in New York, and she had called me to say that blowback had just hit big time, and she was getting out of there. It had become clear that it was a terrorist incident, and we spent some time speculating about who the terrorists were. It wasn't yet obvious that they were Islamic, and our first thought was that it might

more anti-American democracy on earth than Greece, because they're never going to forget the world of the Greek Colonels in the late 1960s and early 1970s who were installed by the CIA and were used to create a reign of terror in that country. So it could have been any number of people around the world. It turns out to have been the veterans of our 1980s efforts against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden was regarded as a colleague, an agent, an asset. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, we were no longer interested in Afghanistan — we simply walked away and left these people holding the bag in an almost totally ruined country.

ACRES U.S.A. Wasn't Saddam Hussein one of our colleagues, as well?

JOHNSON. Yes. Sometimes we'd cynically admit that we knew he had weapons of mass destruction because we had the receipts. There is a rather famous picture now of Donald Rumsfeld visiting Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 1983- 1984, during the Reagan administration, delivering weapons for his war with Iran. Again, one might well ask why the Iranians are anti-American, but you can trace the disastrous situation in the Middle East back

JOHNSON. Nemesis is the Greek goddess of retribution, the punisher of arrogance, of hubris. My argument in the book is that after some 50 years of trying to exercise military hegemony over all parts of the world — thus becoming a new Rome — we have undercut our own political institutions, of which we were at one time very proud. If you believe the Constitution tells you much of anything about how government should function, then today the burden of proof is on you to show how that happens to be the case. There are a number of people who don't sound like they've ever read a word of it. Politicians are just leeches today, starting first of all with the President, who believes that he is the beyond the law. In the book I compare the histories of both the Roman and British empires. The Roman Republic is especially important, as it was such a model for institutions built into our own Constitution. It of course collapsed in the first century B.C. and became a military dictatorship. We now call that the Roman Empire, but the democracy of the Roman Republic was gone in a military *coup*. I also have a long chapter on the CIA and its activities. I spend a considerable length of time on our bases around the world. By current Department of Defense account, there are 337 bases in other people's countries, but the actual number is much larger. They don't count the bases that are disguised in various ways — the bases in England, for example, are largely disguised as Royal Air Force bases even though there are no Englishmen on them. I have a chapter on the weaponiza-

tion of space — \$100 billion spent on what amounts to a scarecrow. We couldn't hit anything with these rockets we've got sunk in the soil of Alaska, and we don't need them anyway. We got rid of the antiballistic missile treaty. That was another bit of wisdom by our Republican enthusiasts for global empire. The concluding chapter is called "The Crisis of the Republic," arguing that these issues are now coming to a head, and my estimate is that the economic security of the system is probably our weakest point.

ACRES U.S.A. That and the inability to even feed ourselves any longer.

JOHNSON. The degree to which we have become dependent on foreign countries is truly astonishing, and there are numerous economists who tell you it is unwise for the world's largest debtor — which is us — to go around insulting its bankers. We do that all the time to the Chinese, who invest billions of dollars buying

American treasury certificates and things like that in order to retain access to this market, continuing to sell as profitably as they are to firms like Wal-Mart, but we send carrier task forces off their coast, and we're forever making threatening statements about them. All it would take is for the Minister of Finance of China to decide that they have too much of their reserves in dollars — which isn't a particularly good currency anyway these days — and they ought to start shifting to the Euro. At that point, the American stock exchange would collapse.

Chalmers Johnson is the author of numerous books and articles. His most recent books, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* and *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*, are available at most bookstores. His forthcoming book, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, is scheduled for publication in early 2007.



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