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Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated

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the Dominican Republic actually benefited when forcibly placed on a fiscal diet by the United States. Although the U.S. Marines were ensuring that nearly half the Dominican Republic’s revenues went to repay foreign creditors, their honesty in disbursing the remainder was so notable that the country received more funds than it had under its own rulers. Boot also points out that Veracruz reached a record standard of cleanliness and hygiene, with an attendant improvement in public health, than it had known previously. Boot reminds us that far from resulting in quagmires of despair and failure, many of these conflicts have to be seen as U.S. successes.

There are, however, several criticisms that might potentially be leveled at this work. Some may say that like so many correspondents before him, Boot excessively admires the U.S. Marines, extolling their triumphs at the expense of the other services. However, while there is no denying that Boot has high regard for leathernecks, he does provide ample examples of Navy and Army actions. It is also important to remember that the Marines were the service of choice for the great majority of these conflicts. A significant portion of the Marines’ senior leadership in the 1930s felt that the future of the Corps should be bound up in mastering the challenges of these conflicts. This resulted in the Marines’ Small Wars Manual, published in 1941. It was later shelved; Boot believes that it would have benefited the United States in Vietnam had those in charge read the dusty tome.

Another criticism that might be made by some is that Boot glosses over the darker aspects of small wars, focusing on the successes and personalities. For example, the first charging of a serving flag officer with a war crime, the use of torture to extract information, and mutinies of such U.S. trained units as the Nicaraguan National Guard were part of the small-war experience. However, Boot discusses these events in clear and unequivocal terms, leaving the reader to come to grips with how these aspects of war played in U.S. successes.

What make this book so timely and one that should be read by almost anyone with an interest in political-military issues, are the tie-ins that Boot identifies as existing between the wars of the past and the realities of the present. Issues such as exit strategies, expected casualties, the difficulties of working with local allies, and the complexities of state building are not things the United States is facing for the first time. Indeed, as Boot demonstrates, the nation has been dealing with these dilemmas since the beginning of its existence.

Well written, timely, and provocative, Savage Wars of Peace is well worth attention.

RICHARD NORTON  
Naval War College


It would be difficult to find a book on world affairs more contrary to the opinions of most readers of the Naval War College Review or other members of the American national security community than Gore Vidal’s Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace.

As a military officer myself, I disagree with many of Vidal’s assumptions and
propositions, but the book is worthwhile because it challenges one to think about inconsistencies and issues in American foreign policy as well as domestic security. The book is extremely well written, as one would expect from a writer of Vidal’s caliber. It is highly engaging, and most military professionals interested in American national security will probably find it easy to read (although fewer may find it easy to agree with).

Gore Vidal is a noted novelist, perhaps one of the most prominent living American authors. In 1943 he enlisted in the Navy and served in World War II, so his background lends relevant experience in military affairs. He wrote his commentary shortly after the 11 September attack, but after both *Vanity Fair* and *The Nation* declined it, a version of this book was printed in Italy, where it became a best-seller. After subsequent publication in Europe, Vidal was finally able to get the book published in its present form.

*Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* contains seven chapters and an introduction, but much of the material predates “9/11,” which is one of the book’s chief weaknesses. Three chapters were reprinted from his *The Last Empire* (Doubleday, 2001), and these were recycled from earlier articles. Another chapter, “The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh,” appeared in the September 2001 issue of *Vanity Fair*. There are sparse updates throughout the older chapters, including asterisked footnotes and comments, such as one briefly comparing the Oklahoma City bombing to “Dark Tuesday” (“9/11”). However, the meat of the new work appears in the first chapter, “September 11, 2001 (A Tuesday).”

Vidal’s sharp mind and readable writing style make his arguments on the World Trade Center attacks and the aftermath compelling. For instance, the declaration of an ambiguous “war” on terror has been the subject of much discussion in the pages of foreign affairs journals and newspaper editorials.

Vidal notes that insurance companies benefit from a state of war due to exception clauses in insurance agreements, although previous U.S. case law has established that “acts of war” can originate only from “a sovereign nation, not a bunch of radicals.” Some of his other comments lean more toward “Swiftian literary exaggeration,” of which he accuses H. L. Mencken in a letter to Timothy McVeigh. His portrayal of Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney as eager for a police state seems excessive. Also, he compares the terrorist attacks in the United States to such state-sponsored atrocities as the burning of the Reichstag (secretly perpetrated by the Nazi government in order to consolidate Hitler’s police power) and rapes by bogus Vietcong squads to discredit the communist insurgency. This paranoid proclivity toward conspiracy theory is revealed in his assertion that Opus Dei is a conservative Catholic conspiracy in the United States. He makes a point about Thomas Jefferson’s and John Adams’s opposition to Jesuit activity in America, which is probably more an indicator of American anti-Catholic bigotry several hundred years ago than any prescient warning of the dangers of religious incursion into state affairs.

There are, however, several arguments that are more convincing. Vidal contends that terror attacks caused more
damage to civil liberties than to the nation’s physical well-being. “Once alienated, an ‘unalienable right’ is apt to be forever lost.” He documents this assertion with a list of police killings of innocent people in their homes and of indefensible searches and seizures. While a reasonable reader may dismiss these discomforting examples as well researched exceptions to normal law enforcement activity in the United States, Vidal also brings up the changing nature of the law. He refers to U.S. v. Sandini (1987), which established that police were able to seize property permanently from an individual if the property has been used for criminal purposes, even if the individual has had no involvement with any crime. This ruling has highly negative implications, considering that 90 percent of American paper currency has traces of narcotics on it from use in the drug trade. Vidal also points out a common problem that is not commonly pondered—the incidence of homosexual rape in the U.S. prison system, a violation of the cruel-and-unusual-punishment clause of the Bill of Rights. For anyone who doubts that such punishment is state sanctioned, Vidal quotes a state attorney general who refers to this practice in a public statement made in the course of his official duties. He is reminiscent of the military author Colonel Charles Dunlap, U.S. Army, in his references to blatant disrespect to President Bill Clinton on a naval vessel by seamen, who called Clinton “the Praetorian Guard of the Pentagon,” and our “ruling junta.”

There is one other weakness: the book fails to address properly the meat of the issue that its title promises—“how we got to be so hated.” The Federation of American Scientists has published a twenty-page listing of American military operations dating from 1948 to 1999, documenting how the United States (like the nations of Orwell’s 1984) has an “enemy of the month club” and thus engages in a “perpetual war” hoping for “perpetual peace.” This theme is underdeveloped, however, and Vidal’s discussion of the United States emphasizes domestic repression, while his reprinted chapters focus too exclusively on an apology (in the Platonic sense of an explanation) of Timothy McVeigh.

Altogether, Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace presents a provocative argument that will be of intellectual appeal to professional military officers. It is admittedly an alternative perspective, but it may give members of the American national security community insight into how our European allies think, as well as our Third World adversaries, who often share Vidal’s perspective. Vidal’s arguments are intriguing, but the brevity of the new parts of this work ultimately leaves his thoughts incomplete.

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Jalali, Ali Ahmad, and Lester W. Grau, eds. The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War. Quantico, Va.: U.S. Marine Corps Studies and Analysis Division. 416pp. (no price given)

What could be both more poignant and ludicrous than Commander Abdul Baqi Balots’s account of his survival of a firefight in which his closest friend was killed? “I saw a lot of Soviets coming at