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How 'the bomb' changed the US

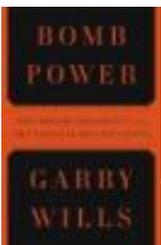
by Joe Feuerherd



Garry Wills (AP/Charles Rex Arbogast:)

More than 40 years ago the editors of *NCR* engaged Garry Wills, then a contributor to Bill Buckley's *National Review*, to write a regular column for this newspaper. He was the conservative counterpoint to the liberal ideas that dominated the era. Wills subsequently traveled an ideological path that places him, for want of a better term to describe the nation's leading public intellectual, on the 'left.'

With *Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State* (The Penguin Press, 2010), Wills returns to his roots. Wills, you see, subscribes to the quaint notion that the Constitution actually means what it says, not least when it comes to the question of war.



The authority to declare war resides exclusively with Congress. The president, writes Wills,

does not have 'the power to initiate, authorize or determine war. He does not even have the power to call the militias to national service, or to organize the Army and Navy and militias. Those are all reserved to

Congress.?

This is a theme that constitutional traditionalists -- those who believe the plain language of the Constitution is determinative -- should embrace. But it is not the manner, writes Wills, in which U.S. foreign and military policy has operated, especially since the advent of the atomic bomb more than six decades back.

Some history. In the early 1940s, General Leslie Groves was given extraordinary power to organize a team of scientists to develop a weapon that could end the war. Groves enlisted the world's leading scientists and built a secret facility within remote Los Alamos, N.M., to house them and their families as they went about their work.

Congress was kept in the dark; even the vice president, Harry Truman, was not informed of the \$2 billion Manhattan Project. (Ironically, not much was secret from the Soviet Union, which relied on Klaus Fuchs, a Los Alamos physicist who was spying for the Soviets, to keep them up to date on the Manhattan Project's progress.)

Postwar, an entirely new foreign policy and national security apparatus was needed to cope with the bomb and the threat, however exaggerated, posed by the Soviet Union. Thus flowed the creation of the National Security Agency, the CIA, NATO, and the military aspects of the Marshall Plan.

Our nation assumed the responsibility to defend non-communist countries against internal and external threat -- everywhere and all the time. That standard would take America into endless conflict in the back alleys of the world. By the early 1950s, writes Wills, the national security state was now almost entirely assembled and put at the president's disposal.

Presidents who possessed the power to destroy the world with a single command, meanwhile, surely had authority to conduct lesser operations, such as undeclared wars in Korea and Vietnam, and the toppling of governments in Iran (for which we still pay the consequences), Guatemala (in support of the United Fruit Company), Chile, and more than 100 other countries. Today's secret and expanding U.S. war in Pakistan, authorized by a nine-year-old congressional resolution following the Sept. 11 attacks, is only the latest example.

John Kennedy would declare, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, that the Soviet placement of missiles off our shores was none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.

Writes Wills: Kennedy could not admit that there was a defensive rationale for Cuba's missiles, since that would involve admitting U.S. covert operations -- Operation Mongoose -- designed to overthrow Castro's government. Kennedy, writes Wills, risked nuclear war to keep his secrets.

Secrecy destroys accountability, provides cover for failures and ill-conceived unconstitutional plans -- such as the torture of Taliban fighters and al-Qaeda terrorists and the tapping of American phone lines.

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The atomic bomb warped U.S. foreign and military policy over the past 70-plus years, contends Wills. He makes a persuasive case.

Perhaps the only way to restore a constitutional order is to get rid of these weapons.

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