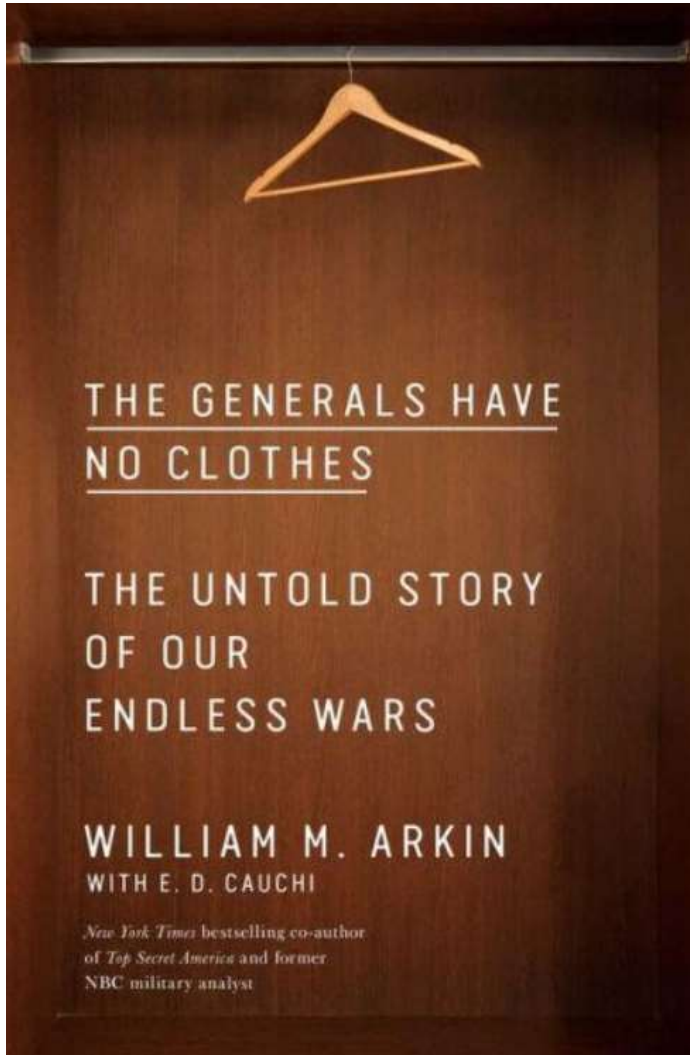


Highly Recommended: Arkin's 'The Generals Have No Clothes' difficult to put down

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*"The Generals Have No Clothes: The Untold Story of Our Endless Wars" by William M. Arkin.
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021, 272 pages, \$28 (hardcover).*



“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.” – Dwight D. Eisenhower on Jan. 17, 1961.

“During the Cold War, a misstep in the nuclear machine might have led to nuclear war, and this created a world of cautious deliberation and a general resistance to change,” William M. Arkin notes near the beginning of “The Generals Have No Clothes: The Untold Story of Our Endless Wars,” his captivating new treatise on the infrastructure on which much of the modern world is built. “Perpetual war follows a similar pattern, the fear being that letting up anywhere might result in another 9/11.”

“Where the two eras further intersect is in the presence of a disruptive leader,” he continues. “We forget that Ronald Reagan – with all of his Star Wars craziness and neutron bomb enthusiasm – was outrageous and considered ignorant and dangerous. And yet his disruptions challenged the entire fabric of deterrence, and his musing about disarmament led to the single greatest shift in ending the Cold War.”

So begins a fascinating and exceptionally thought-provoking foray into one of the most profound realities underpinning the contemporary world – and our role in bringing that reality into existence. Arkin has spent most of his professional career delving into how the U.S. military uses war as a justification for virtually everything – from boots on the ground to our ever-expanding cyber intelligence capabilities. Although the picture he meticulously constructs of the architecture that has exponentially evolved over the course of the past few decades is harrowing, it is his proposed roadmap for getting us out of this self-perpetuating dilemma that I find most intriguing. More on that later.

“The Generals” is one of the more extensively-researched books I have had occasion to consume in recent memory, with 58 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 12 chapters and epilogue that form the main narrative. Arkin’s literary style is conversational, fluid and convincing; I found his prose accessible even without having an extensive background in much of the subject matter he covers so effortlessly. There is an honesty about the stories he tells that seems to permeate each page in this exquisite little primer. You definitely get the impression that you can trust his observations and interpretations because he has lived through – or has firsthand knowledge of – most of the events he describes in the book.

One of the most unsettling revelations in “The Generals Have No Clothes,” at least for me, was found in the ninth chapter, which deals with the concept of “convergence.”

“In convergence, the national security establishment has perhaps reached its highest pinnacle, policing anything and everything,” Arkin explains. “The expansive focus to trace movement pathways – global, regional and country-based – makes each criminal activity the equivalent of terrorism, mission creep at its worse. Each piece of this battle might make sense if it is seen in isolation. But the ultimate convergence of perpetual war is not only how it turns activities on the entire planet into one networked enemy but how at the same time it further obscures the dividing line between what is military and what is civilian. While convergence provides justification to fight an expansive enemy, ‘persistence’ is the latest concept that ensures that perpetual war will maintain its worldwide footprint.”

Reflect on that for a while and see if you don’t break out in a cold sweat.

Arkin, who served in U.S. Army Intelligence from 1974 to 1978, subsequently co-authored four volumes of the Nuclear Weapons Databook series for the Natural Resources Defense Council. A founding member of the Arms Project of Human Rights Watch who wrote its first comprehensive report on cluster bombs, he also provided an analysis of the causes of civilian casualties after the Kosovo war. A prolific journalist and consultant who has visited war zones in the former Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Israel, Arkin wrote a column in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists called the “Last Word” from 1985 to 2002 as well as co-authored a bi-monthly publication by the Natural Resources Defense Council called the Nuclear Notebook. His previous books include “Unmanned: Drones, Data and the Illusion of Perfect Warfare,” “American Coup: How a Terrified Government is Destroying the Constitution” and “Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State” with Dana Priest.

As far as how to deal with the behemoth we have unwittingly fashioned in our own image, Arkin essentially calls for a new era of true – not just theoretical – civilian control over the military. His arguments are as compelling and realistic as his reasons for not reigning in the military’s power are scary and fatalistic. One recommendation I found particularly auspicious is his call for a Global Security Index, which you can think of as being roughly analogous to the Dow Jones Industrial Average. The idea is to create a monitoring agency that would continually measure national and international events in real time, with the goal of determining the ongoing effect perpetual war is actually having on our national security as well as that of everyone else who shares the planet. The basic premise is that the American people would be much better served by facts rather than motivated by constant fear.

Needless to say, I found this one difficult to put down – which was good in the sense that much of it was not conducive to a good night’s sleep. It was either keep reading or succumb to the inevitable nightmares precipitated by the scenarios Arkin was relating. “The Generals Have No Clothes” will definitely make you think. Hopefully it will make you want to act. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.