

James Risen on war and the US financial aristocracy

Pay Any Price: Greed, Power, and Endless War Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014

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Today more than ever, the establishment media serves as a conduit for the ruling class to disseminate propaganda and lies. James Risen, a reporter for the *New York Times*, is one of a dwindling number of journalists who seek to expose the truth. He is the author of a series of articles and books detailing the crimes carried out by the Bush and Obama administrations over the course of the so-called “war on terror.”

Risen’s new book, *Pay Any Price: Greed, Power, and Endless War*, published in October, is a further contribution to the exposure of the anti-democratic and lawless agenda being carried out by the US government around the world. The book includes details of hitherto unreported actions that, even after a decade of similar exposures, cannot but shock the reader.

To make an example of those who dare to expose government crimes, the Obama administration has subpoenaed Risen and is threatening to imprison him. In a case set to go to court in January, the government is seeking to force Risen to turn over confidential source material as part of an Espionage Act prosecution of CIA leaker Jeffrey Sterling. Risen has said he will accept a multi-year jail term rather than hand over First Amendment-protected material to the government.

At the conclusion of his book, Risen writes: “*Pay Any Price* is my answer to how best to challenge the government’s draconian efforts to crack down on aggressive investigative reporting and suppress the truth in the name of ceaseless war.

“My answer is to keep writing, because I believe that if journalists ever stop uncovering abuses of power, and ever stop publishing stories about those abuses, we will lose our democracy.”

Pay Any Price focuses on the connection between government crimes and a parasitic corporate-financial layer that has amassed huge sums of money by facilitating them. Risen refers to the “war on terror” as a “bipartisan enterprise” and argues that it is driven largely by war profiteers.

“Obama performed a neat political trick” upon his election in 2009, Risen writes. “He took the national security state that had grown to such enormous size under Bush and made it his own. In the process, Obama normalized the post-9/11 measures that Bush had implemented on a haphazard, emergency basis. Obama’s great achievement—or great sin—was to make the national security state permanent.”

At certain points in the book, Risen points to the connection between the growth of militarism and war, the increasing power of the

corporate-military-intelligence nexus, and the growth of social inequality. He writes: “Far more than any other conflict in American history, the global war on terror has been waged along free-market principles.” He adds at another point that “the tenets of twenty-first-century American capitalism have become the bywords of twenty-first-century American combat.”

While noting that the US intelligence budget “stood at more than \$70 billion a year” in 2013, Risen writes: “It is no accident that seven of the ten wealthiest counties in America are in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. A 2012 report by Reuters found that income inequality in Washington was greater than in almost any other city, thanks to the massive amounts of money flowing to lobbyists, contractors, and others benefiting directly or indirectly from federal spending” on the military and intelligence apparatus.

He adds that while massive amounts are spent on building the CIA’s network of spies and assassins, “In Wichita, Denver, and Phoenix, meanwhile, McDonald’s is hiring.”

Pay Any Price ties US foreign policy, with its endless wars of aggression, to the growth of a “new oligarchy.” This layer of spymasters and weapons peddlers has amassed great fortunes on the basis of wars that have thus far left over one million dead.

In a chapter titled “The New Oligarchy,” Risen writes a series of character portraits of billionaires who have enriched themselves from the crimes of US imperialism around the world. He notes that the military drone was initially developed by two fierce anti-communists, Neal and Lindon Blue, who were seeking a way to defeat the Nicaraguan Sandinista movement in the 1980s.

He details the rise of defense contracting firms such as CACI, whose employees served as torture masters at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. CACI has defended its role in the scandal and, as Risen notes, the company “has boomed since,” posting revenue of \$3.7 billion in 2012 thanks to increased government contracts from the Obama administration.

Risen describes how Wall Street tycoon Robert McKeon made \$320 million from government contracts while directing Dyncorp International, whose police training contractors paid “dancing boys” to entertain Afghan policemen following the US invasion. McKeon killed himself in 2012, but the living corporate leaders who profited from the wars of the past decade have been given de facto legal immunity by the Bush and Obama administrations.

“There is an entire class of wealthy company owners, corporate

executives, and investors who have gotten rich by enabling the American government to turn to the dark side,” Risen writes. “They are the beneficiaries of one of the largest transfers of wealth from public to private hands in American history.”

He continues: “The war imperative, the war economy, and the war lobby all remain powerful in Washington. The transfer of power from one political party to another seems to have had little effect.”

It is not possible here to outline all of the crimes enumerated by Risen in his book, which include:

- * The government’s use of a series of shadowy CIA assets to infiltrate lawsuits by the relatives of those killed on September 11 in order to monitor the independent investigations.

- * Government plans to sell drones to Syria and establish shell corporations that would have been used to conduct drone assassinations.

- * Former Halliburton subsidiary KBR’s responsibility for the deaths of at least 18 soldiers who were electrocuted while showering at American bases in Iraq. KBR’s faulty electrical work was to blame. The firm, which has thus far escaped liability, received \$39.5 billion in Pentagon contracts during the war.

- * The American Psychological Association’s altering of its ethics code to enable its leadership to rubber-stamp the CIA torture programs as part of a quid pro quo deal in which the Bush administration awarded psychologists the lucrative job of writing prescriptions for patients.

Worth addressing in greater detail is Risen’s account of the role played by former congressional aid Diane Roark, who was notified of the National Security Agency’s warrantless wiretapping program in the months following September 11, 2001. Roark addressed her concerns over the unconstitutionality of the spying program with members of all three branches of government and was met with a mixture of threats and silence.

Roark asserts that then-NSA Director Michael Hayden told her: “We didn’t need [Fourth Amendment privacy protections built into the surveillance programs] because we had the power.” Hayden threatened Roark that any disclosure of the programs—even to Congress — would be considered a “leak,” and that she had best remain silent.

When Roark addressed her concerns to Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the judge “called the Justice Department to inform officials there that Roark was asking questions, and that Roark should expect a call from a Justice Department lawyer.”

Risen writes that Roark wrote a memo to then-Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who also ignored her concerns.

Roark’s hitherto underreported efforts to focus attention on the unconstitutional spying programs underscore the complicity of all three branches of government in approving the mass surveillance. Roark’s warnings make clear that both the legislative and judicial branches were aware of the NSA programs as early as 2001, and did nothing to prevent their expansion.

Pay Any Price is not without its serious weaknesses, however. Most importantly, Risen operates under the false conception that the war on terror was initiated with “good intentions” by the Bush administration, and that “the original objectives of the war got lost in the process.”

Further, Risen presents “greed” and the thirst for “power” as the driving forces behind the crimes carried out under the auspices of the war on terror. He fails to understand that subjective greed and the desire for power are not themselves the driving factors behind war and

social inequality, but are rather expressions of deeper political, social and historical processes bound up with the crisis of American and world capitalism.

Risen does not operate with the conception of imperialism as a historical and political reality. Imperialist war, leading inexorably to a nuclear World War III, cannot be prevented through moral appeals to the financial aristocracy or its political representatives.

But despite its limitations, *Pay Any Price* is important reading for those interested in uncovering the crimes carried out by the US government on behalf of the financial aristocracy under the banner of the “war on terror.”

One important aspect of the book is the light it sheds on the role played by the *New York Times*. Acting as the mouthpiece for the military and intelligence agencies in 2003, the *Times* published accounts from the pen of Judith Miller of the existence of “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq. The next year, *Times* Editor Bill Keller refused to publish stories written by Risen and Eric Lichtblau exposing unconstitutional warrantless wiretapping. The *Times* published those articles only when Risen threatened to do so independently.

In the years since, the so-called “newspaper of record” has continued to act as a de facto organ of the military/intelligence apparatus, dishing out propaganda in defense of US aggression in Libya and Syria and Washington’s escalating diplomatic, economic and military offensives against Russia and China.

After the publication of the stories detailing the spying programs (for which Risen and Lichtblau won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006) and of Risen’s book *State of War*, the Obama administration opened up a series of investigations aimed at punishing the journalist and making an example of him to others. The FBI attempted to block the publication of *State of War*. When this became unfeasible, the government combed the pages of the book to find a pretext for prosecuting Risen in connection with the release of classified information.

In 2008, a federal grand jury issued a subpoena to Risen in a criminal case relating to a botched CIA plan to delay the alleged development of the Iranian nuclear program. The government sought to force Risen to reveal confidential sources that would help prosecutors convict the defendant, Jeffrey Sterling.

In 2009, the subpoena expired but was renewed by the Obama administration. In July 2013, two Democratic-appointed judges on the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals overruled a lower court decision to quash the subpoena, declaring: “There is no First Amendment testimonial privilege, absolute or qualified, that protects a reporter from being compelled to testify by the prosecution or the defense in criminal proceedings...”

In July 2014, the Supreme Court refused to hear Risen’s appeal.

The frame-up against Risen is an attempt by the Obama administration to purge the press of any remaining independent elements. Risen’s legal battle against the subpoena is among the most important free speech fights in the history of the United States.



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