



Written by [John and Nisha Whitehead](#) on May 28, 2026

# The Permanent War Government: Who's Really Calling the Shots in Washington?

Who is actually running the government?

That is no longer a rhetorical question.

As America's war with Iran lurches from escalation to ceasefire to renewed threats of military force, Americans are being asked to trust that someone, somewhere, knows what they are doing.

But who?

This is the constitutional crisis hiding in plain sight.

The question is not merely whether Donald Trump is fit to lead. The question is whether any president still leads in any meaningful constitutional sense once the permanent war government gets moving.

The Iran war is merely the latest test case.

If the war machine keeps moving even when the public cannot tell who is steering it, then what remains of constitutional government?

This is the nightmare Rod Serling warned about in *Seven Days in May*.

Released in 1964, [Seven Days in May](#) imagined a dramatic military coup: generals plotting in secret to overthrow an unpopular president because they believed they knew better than the American people what was best for the nation.

The coup is eventually foiled. The republic is saved. The Constitution survives.

At least on screen.

In the real world, the plot has thickened and spread out over decades.

The old fear was that the military might seize power from the civilian government.

The modern reality is that the permanent government does not need to seize power.

It already has it.

The coup no longer requires generals in smoke-filled rooms plotting to overthrow the president at midnight. It does not require tanks on Pennsylvania Avenue or soldiers storming the Capitol. It does not even require an official suspension of the Constitution.

All it requires is secrecy, fear, endless war, executive power, emergency declarations, classified intelligence, compliant courts, cowardly legislators, corporate profiteers, militarized police, and a public too distracted, exhausted or frightened to resist.

That coup has been underway for decades.



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It is the coup that occurs when [Congress surrenders its war powers](#) to the president.

It is the coup that occurs when [presidents of both parties wage war without meaningful constitutional authorization](#).

It is the coup that occurs when [intelligence agencies spy on the American people](#) and then hide behind national security.

It is the coup that occurs when [federal agencies arm themselves like military units](#).

It is the coup that occurs when [local police are transformed into extensions of the military](#).

It is the coup that occurs when whistleblowers are punished, dissenters are surveilled, protesters are treated like enemies, and the public is told to trust whatever version of events the government chooses to release.

It is the coup that occurs when unelected bureaucrats, contractors, data brokers, intelligence analysts, defense executives and crisis managers exercise more practical control over government policy than the voters do.

This is how freedom disappears: not all at once, not in one dramatic seizure of power, but incrementally, bureaucratically, profitably and in the name of national security.

Dwight D. Eisenhower warned us about this in 1961.

A five-star general who understood war better than most modern politicians ever will, Eisenhower cautioned Americans to “[guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex](#).” The danger, he warned, was that “[misplaced power](#)” would endanger liberty and democratic processes.

He was right.

The military industrial complex has become one of the most powerful governing forces in America.

This is not a left-right problem.

Both parties built this.

Republicans and Democrats alike have funded the wars, renewed the surveillance powers, armed the police, expanded executive authority, protected intelligence agencies, rewarded defense contractors, and treated the Constitution as an inconvenience whenever fear could be used to silence dissent.

One president abuses power. The next one inherits it. The next one expands it. The next one normalizes it. The next one weaponizes it.

This is how emergency powers become everyday powers.

This is how temporary measures become permanent law.

This is how the president becomes a king in all but name.

And this is how the people become spectators in their own government.

This is exactly where we are.

We have allowed the government to wage war without declarations of war.

We have allowed intelligence agencies to operate behind walls of secrecy.

We have allowed presidents to rule by executive order.



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We have allowed Congress to become a spectator.

We have allowed the courts to defer to national security.

We have allowed police to become soldiers.

We have allowed corporations to profit from fear.

We have allowed unelected officials to make decisions that alter the course of the nation.

And then we act surprised when no one seems to know who is actually in charge.

The answer is as obvious as it is disturbing.

The permanent war government is in charge.

This is the coup that does not end.

This is the lesson of our age: the greatest threat to freedom is not always a madman seizing power in a single moment of crisis. Sometimes it is a bureaucracy that never sleeps, a war machine that never stops, a security state that never shrinks, and a political class that never says no.

So what do we do?

We stop allowing the government to turn every crisis into a blank check for more power.

And we start insisting, relentlessly, that those who claim to defend the United States must defend it with the tools the Constitution supplies.

If the government wants war, make Congress vote on it.

If the government wants surveillance, make it get a warrant.

If the government wants to police dissent, make it answer to the First Amendment.

If the government wants to spend trillions on war, make it explain why the American people are being robbed blind to enrich defense contractors.

If the government wants emergency powers, make it prove the emergency and surrender the powers when the crisis passes.

If the Pentagon wants to run foreign policy, remind it that in a constitutional republic, the military answers to civilian authority, and civilian authority answers to the people.

The permanent war government has given us endless wars, bankrupting debt, militarized police, mass surveillance, constitutional erosion, fear-driven politics, and a republic that increasingly resembles an occupied territory.

If we are to remain free, the war machine must be brought back under constitutional control.

The generals, bureaucrats, contractors, intelligence agencies, police forces and presidents must all be reminded of the same truth: They do not own this country.

As I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) and in its fictional counterpart [The Erik Blair Diaries](#), they do not rule us.

They work for us.



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## About John & Nisha Whitehead:

*Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of The Rutherford Institute. His latest books [The Erik Blair Diaries](#) and [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) are available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Whitehead can be contacted at [johnw@rutherford.org](mailto:johnw@rutherford.org). Nisha Whitehead is the Executive Director of The Rutherford Institute. Information about The Rutherford Institute is available at [www.rutherford.org](http://www.rutherford.org).*



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