

NOVEMBER 2019, QUINCY BRIEF NO. 2

Enough Toxic Militarism

by Nikhil Pal Singh

New York University

- Decades of militarization in U.S. foreign policy have fueled violence at every level of American society, from the households of veterans to public spaces like schools and malls. Its impact on the domestic and global environment is equally deleterious.
- In particular, military interventions abroad have stoked racism at home. Police now operate with the weapons and mentality of combat soldiers, and they tend to frame vulnerable communities as enemies to be punished.
- The era of reckless indulgence and executive license in international affairs must come to end. Congress should reassert its authority to shape foreign policy in the interest of democratic values and peaceful cooperation wherever possible.

I teach college students at New York University's campus on Washington Square in Manhattan and in its prison program in upstate New York. My students have never lived in a time when the United States was not at war. Growing up after the Vietnam War, when the United States had converted to an all-volunteer military, the great majority of my N.Y.U. students have not served in uniform, although the military is more likely to be a stop on the itinerary, or part of family experience, for those who end up in prison. For most of them, the wars in which U.S. soldiers and support personnel have been engaged on three continents for the past two decades retain a hazy, distant, and amorphous character; this perception is also typical now among civilian noncombatants. That the consequences of war-fighting remain seemingly remote ironically reinforces war as a natural and unchanging backdrop to social life in the United States today. We are overdue for a major cost accounting and reappraisal of these permanent wars.



Led by mounting disquiet over the start, course, and conduct of the Iraq war, beginning with the invasion in 2003, U.S. voters have registered antipathy to overseas military intervention in the last three presidential election cycles. But hardly has official policy hewed to popular sentiment. Barack Obama lowered the volume of the Bush administration's global war on terror, ending its worst, sanctioned abuses, such as torture and rendition. But with his increased use of drones he amplified the techniques of remote war-fighting and augmented the U.S. global military footprint, now comprised of more than 800 hundred bases in more than 80 countries. Donald Trump, though seemingly hostile to "endless war," has consistently promoted more lethal military authority for commanders in the field. He has reversed Obama's singular policy achievement of successful nuclear diplomacy with Iran, cast unauthorized migration on the southern border as akin to enemy invasion, and leveraged U.S. military aid for partisan political aims.

After nearly two decades, U.S. troops are still fighting in Afghanistan. During this time, politicians became adept at concealing the reality and the price of war and militarism, even as they failed to achieve any significant, promised objectives. Euphemisms for war abound in the name of Operation [fill in the adjective] Freedom and Justice, helping to ensure that military budgets never shrink, forward planning proceeds apace, and fighting never stops.

Yet the costs of unbridled militarism are everywhere, hidden in plain sight. These include a multi-trillion-dollar price tag for the global war on terror, funded off-book and unaccounted for within the spiraling U.S. public debt burden.¹ These costs also include the metastasizing rather than diminishing problems of terrorism and

violent extremism and an accelerating regional conflagration in the Middle East that persistently rewards malign actors.²

Alongside these are other costs, no less consequential, that are even less often acknowledged. After two decades of war and increasing defense budgets in the name of "homeland security," U.S. society itself has never in living memory been more riven by civic animus and dysfunctional, friend-enemy politics. Proliferating mass violence involving weapons of war, declining life expectancy, and suicidal fatalism — the last a prominent affliction of soldiers — have become features of everyday life throughout the United States.³ What if these, too, are part of the unaccounted price and collateral consequence of the U.S. addiction to war? What if the steady militarization of U.S. foreign policy over the past several decades, and forces steadily decaying domestic social bonds, institutional stability, and public trust, are related?

The Scales of Harm

Wartime trauma courses through the tributaries of "peacetime" family and household relations, crossing generations. This includes the pain and guilt experienced by the perpetrators of harm in war, the inflammation of depressive and retributive feelings about loved ones injured or lost, and ongoing displacements of internalized violence, re-enacted by veterans upon themselves and others. Entering the American psychological lexicon in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, "post-traumatic stress disorder" is one of the major risk factors for active-duty and returning soldiers.

¹ Neta C. Crawford, "United States Budgetary Costs and Obligations of Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2020: \$6.4 Trillion," Costs of War Project, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2019/budgetary-costs-post-911-wars-through-fy2020-64-trillion>.

² Eric Rosand and Alistair Millar, "Nearly 20 Years Later: It's Time to Reset Our Approach to Countering Terrorism," *Just Security*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/67270/nearly-20-years-later-its-time-to-reset-our-approach-to-countering-terrorism/>.

³ Melissa Healy, "Suicides and overdoses among factors fueling drop in U.S. life expectancy," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2019-11-26/life-expectancy-decline-deaths-of-despair>; Dan Lamothe, "U.S. Military's Suicide Rate for Active-Duty Troops Up over the Past Five Years, Pentagon Says," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2019/09/26/us-militarys-suicide-rate-active-duty-troops-rises-fifth-consecutive-year-pentagon-says/>.

It has also been linked to drug addiction and rising intimate-partner violence in military families, suggesting a redoubled impact. It is no surprise that rates of opioid abuse and domestic violence soared inside the military during and after the most intense period of the Iraq War; the latter surged 250 percent at Fort Carson, Colo., from 2006 to 2009, and rose 177 percent overall in the Army from 2003 to 2010.⁴

As war afflicts an untold number of personal environments, so it ravages the ecosystems we share. Notably, the Pentagon has recognized the national security threat posed by climate change, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events. Nonetheless, as one of the largest military forces in human history, with approximately 200,000 troops deployed overseas, the U.S. military is, according to recent studies, “one of the largest polluters in history,” producing more hazardous waste than the world’s five largest U.S. multinational chemical companies combined.⁵ The toxic legacy of U.S. military action is now strewn the world over, from depleted uranium in Iraq, to dioxin poisoning in Southeast Asia, to massive jet-fuel spills in Virginia Beach, Va. More than 700 cases of contaminated drinking water on U.S. military bases across the country have recently been documented.⁶ As the world’s single largest institutional consumer of oil and emitter of greenhouse gases, the U.S. military can no longer escape the paradox: An institution managed and consistently augmented in the name of human security has become a threat to human survival.

The Frame of War

Private suffering and environmental stress are difficult to observe directly. The no-less-toxic manifestations of war within social and institutional relationships are more visible but no better understood. Throughout U.S. history, militarism and racism have augmented one another in a tightly bound reciprocity, via the demonization and dehumanization of enemies depicted as merciless and unjust. Japanese internment was a lasting stain on the U.S. conduct of World War II. Recent scholarship shows that after the Vietnam War, returning soldiers became a recruiting ground for rising far-right and violent white-power extremism.⁷

John Burge, the notorious policeman, learned the techniques of torture as a military policeman in Vietnam. Redeploying to Chicago, he abused hundreds of uncharged black criminal suspects over the following decades, applying electric shocks to them with a makeshift device similar to those once fashioned in the P.O.W. camps he previously oversaw. Another Chicago policeman accused of denying domestic criminal suspects their rights, Richard Zuley, had participated in “enhanced interrogations” at Guantánamo Bay as a Navy officer.⁸ Meanwhile, the domestic U.S. prison complex has exported its “dehumanizing prison culture and brutal penal practices,” with numerous administrators and guards applying abusive know-how learned on the

⁴ Andrew R. Klein, “Practical Implications of Current Domestic Violence Research for Probation Officers and Administrators,” Battered Women’s Justice Project, March 15, 2015, https://www.bwjp.org/assets/documents/pdfs/practical_implications_of_current_domestic_violence_research_for_probation_officers_and_administrators.pdf.

⁵ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, “Despite Vow to End ‘Endless Wars,’ Here’s Where About 200,000 Troops Remain,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/world/middleeast/us-troops-deployments.html>; Whitney Webb, “U.S. Military Is World’s Biggest Polluter,” *MintPress News* via *EcoWatch*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.ecowatch.com/military-largest-polluter-2408760609.html>; Abrahm Lustgarten, “Get an Inside Look at the Department of Defense’s Struggle to Fix Pollution at More Than 39,000 Sites,” *ProPublica*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/nerds/data-get-an-inside-look-at-the-department-of-defense-struggle-to-fix-pollution>; Oliver Belcher, Patrick Bigger, Ben Neimark, and Cara Kennelly, “Hidden Carbon Costs of the ‘Everywhere War’: Logistics, Geopolitical Ecology, and the Carbon Boot-Print of the US Military,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (June 2019): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12319>.

⁶ Jaden Urbi, “A New Drinking Water Crisis Hits US Military Bases Across the Nation,” *CNBC*, July 13, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/12/new-drinking-water-crisis--stemming-from-us-military-bases-pfas-contamination.html>.

⁷ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁸ Spencer Ackerman, “Bad Lieutenant: American Police Brutality, Exported from Chicago to Guantánamo,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/feb/18/american-police-brutality-chicago-guantanamo>.

job inside US prisons in the scandalous torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.⁹

The revolving door between civilian and military policing is no small matter in a country whose permanent war footing overseas coincided with a long and unprecedented rise of a cruel, starkly racialized system of criminal punishment and mass incarceration at home. Researchers have shown that the transfer of military equipment to police, under the Department of Defense’s 1033 program, is statistically correlated with fatalities from police shootings. “As militarization seeps into their cultures,” they write, “law enforcement officials rely more on violence to solve problems.”¹⁰

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was neither exaggerating nor speaking metaphorically when he remarked that the promise of the Great Society had been shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam.

In the early 1970s, Adam Yarmolinsky, a former aide to U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and later a professor of public policy, homed in on a salient connection that still resonates. “The use of techniques applied in foreign wars and planning for future wars may lead to increased likelihood that certain groups in American society will gradually be regarded as an enemy with action appropriate to that perception,” he wrote in *The Military Establishment: Its Impacts on American Society*, his 1971 book. “Insensitivity to unwarranted police violence and insensitivity to brutality in military action — abroad and at home — may be unrelated phenomena, but they cannot escape mutual reinforcement.”¹¹

One of the architects of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, Yarmolinsky saw first-hand how U.S. government priorities for helping the poor and unemployed, particularly in black urban areas, shifted from repair and rehabilitation to punitive crime-control measures. Johnson signaled this new objective in 1965, describing criminal conduct as a “war within our boundaries.”¹² Chief Darryl Gates, who later presided over the Los Angeles Police Department, one of the first urban departments to militarize, later recalled these years as a time when he and his fellow police professionals began studying counterinsurgency and riot-control techniques used by the U.S. military in Vietnam and elsewhere. “The streets of America’s cities had become a foreign territory,” he explained in *Chief: My Life in the LAPD*, his 1993 autobiography.¹³

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was neither exaggerating nor speaking metaphorically when he remarked that the promise of the Great Society had been shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam. Though King was

⁹ Judith Greene, “From Abu Ghraib to America: Examining Our Harsh Prison Culture,” *Ideas for an Open Society* 4, no. 1 (October 2004): https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/ideas-open-society-abu-ghraib-america#publications_download.

¹⁰ Casey Delehanty, Jack Mewhirter, Ryan Welch, and Jason Wilks, “Militarization and Police Violence: The Case of the 1033 Program,” *Research & Politics* 4, no. 2 (April–June 2017), 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017712885>.

¹¹ Adam Yarmolinsky, *The Military Establishment: Its Impacts on American Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 193.

¹² Elizabeth Hinton, “‘A War Within Our Own Boundaries’: Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015): 100–112, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav328>.

¹³ Daryl F. Gates with Diane K. Shaw, *Chief: My Life In The L.A.P.D.* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 110.



explicitly concerned with how the war strained fiscal spending to remediate poverty, he also pointed to how a longer trajectory of approaching foreign affairs as a militarized project of providing police assistance to counter “subversives” had come home to roost. His insight is documented in important works of current scholarship. Stuart Schrader’s *Badges Without Borders*, for example, demonstrates how the outlook, techniques, and approaches of overseas counterinsurgency and domestic policing had become inextricable by the late 1960s.¹⁴

Corrupting Democracy

Discussion of U.S. foreign policy often proceeds as if the foreign and domestic are neatly separated realms. But what if the expanded purview of U.S. global policing has in fact been a medium for the expansion of coercive governance without democracy at home as well as overseas? As historians have documented, to launch the Cold War the Truman administration had to “scare the hell out the American people,” as Senator Arthur Vandenberg allegedly counseled President Truman to do in March 1947, on the grounds that the U.S. public expected to live at peace and lacked the requisite martial ambition. Similarly, a high-level study in the mid-1950s, directed by Harvard Professor William Yandell Elliott, concluded that the United States could not simply allow countries to revolt from colonial empires and conduct their own affairs. Instead, U.S. economic and resource needs were such that “it will not always be possible for the West to avoid interventions which are too reminiscent of colonialism to win the approval of Western and native liberals.” Then, much as now, the disastrous military interventions of the future were being set in motion without the check of democratic politics.¹⁵

Interventions proceeded apace, beginning with the secret C.I.A.–initiated overthrow in 1953 of Mohammad

Mossadegh in Iran and of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala the following year. A decade later Washington used a minor skirmish in the Gulf of Tonkin as pretext for sending U.S. ground forces to Vietnam. In the 1980s came the funding of the Nicaraguan Contras in contravention of congressional prohibitions codified in the 1982–84 Boland Amendment. This pattern endured with the hyping of the threat posed by Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” as a prelude to the 2003 invasion.

A trail of intentional deceit, manipulation, and fraud has thus marked efforts to conscript or mislead a skeptical U.S. public into wars subsequently judged to have been unnecessary, unaccountable, and unjust. Professor Elliott, it turns out, was the Ph.D. advisor to a young Henry Kissinger, a man whose career indexes much of this tragic arc. It was Kissinger, after all, who observed, when signaling U.S. support for the military overthrow in 1973 of Chile’s democratically elected socialist president, Salvador Allende, that such matters were too important to be left to the will of the Chilean people. So it might be said of U.S. leaders’ attitude toward the American people.

The problem is greater than the Beltway insulation of foreign policy making. The bipartisan political consensus supporting a hypertrophied U.S. global military presence is a popular target, but it can obscure the longer-standing cycles of foreign threat inflation in the interests of partisan politics and defense industry gains. This domestic political dynamic regularly clouds international judgment and corrupts democratic politics. Lyndon Johnson viewed the Vietnam war as a price to pay, lest cherished domestic priorities become casualties to G.O.P. attacks that he “lost Vietnam” as the Truman administration had supposedly “lost China” (a key charge of Senator Joseph McCarthy). Presidential candidate Richard Nixon chose to sabotage the Paris Peace Accords in 1968 rather than risk losing the election to Hubert Humphry, allowing the war to rage on at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.¹⁶

¹⁴ Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland: University of California Press 2019).

¹⁵ William Y. Elliott et al., *The Political Economy of American Foreign Policy: Its Concepts, Strategy, and Limits* (New York: Holt, 1955).

¹⁶ John A. Farrell, “When a Candidate Conspired With a Foreign Power to Win An Election,” *Politico*, August 6, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/06/nixon-vietnam-candidate-conspired-with-foreign-power-win-election-215461>.

Evidence suggests presidential candidate Ronald Reagan dispatched his campaign manager (and future C.I.A. director), William Casey, to persuade Iran to continue holding U.S. hostages captive lest their release while President Carter was still in office damage Reagan's electoral chances in 1980. That turn of events foreshadowed a series of unsavory third-party deals with the Iranian regime.¹⁷ The scandals of the Trump era may eventually dwarf these earlier occasions, as charges of collusion with foreign powers interfering in U.S. elections, and the subordination of foreign policy decisions to political ends, have become inseparable from partisan struggle.

Rethinking Priorities

We have been persistently told that spending more on the military than the next seven powers combined, supporting a vast proportion of the global arms trade, and retaining a preponderance of power to intervene anywhere in the world, against any adversary or combination of adversaries, keeps the country safe, maintains global peace, and provides insurance against the emergence of "something worse."¹⁸ The baseline of something worse generally refers back to the summum malum defined in the World War II era: the ravages of economic depression, genocidal totalitarianism, the first use of nuclear weapons. For more than three-quarters of a century, we have told ourselves a flattering and one-sided story about American universalism rising from the ashes of war and standing up for the creation of an enduring architecture of collective security defined by a liberal international legal order and a global capitalist economic order. All this saved the world from international communism, created a "long peace," and built (or rebuilt) affluent societies at home and abroad.

One does not need to reject this story in all its particulars to recognize how threadbare it has become, particularly in the period since the Vietnam War. This rosy narrative no longer bears the weight of the United States' staggering contribution to mass violence, regional destabilization, and ecological decay. It defies U.S. support for illiberal authoritarianism and despotism

This rosy narrative no longer bears the weight of the United States' staggering contribution to mass violence, regional destabilization, and ecological decay.

and its illegitimate interference in the internal affairs of other countries via arms dealing, coups, and proxy wars. Even if we were not burdened with such a compromised history, the period since Vietnam has witnessed an accelerated unraveling of the benign story of U.S. global power. The end of the Soviet Union, in turn, reduced pressure on the United States to sustain the very international institutions that were once seen as central to meeting the communist challenge, a cause that also brought attention to addressing racial and economic inequality in our own society.

Those challenges remain, with new ones on top of them: climate breakdown, nuclear proliferation, near-genocidal

¹⁷ Kai Bird, "Some 'October Surprise' Conspiracies Turn Out to Be True," *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-bird-conspiracies-october-surprises-20170620-story.html>.

¹⁸ K.K. Rebecca Lai, Troy Griggs, Max Fisher, and Audrey Carlsen, "Is America's Military Big Enough?," *New York Times*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/22/us/is-americas-military-big-enough.html>.



warfare, political corruption, deepening inequality, secular stagnation, offshore wealth-hoarding. In all of this, the U.S. penchant for militarized unilateralism, backed by ad-hoc coalitions, has been more distraction than solution, more combustible than calming. It is a time for a major rethink of America's international priorities, of its national security goals, procedures, and expenditures. In particular:

1. At the core of this rethinking should be an intentional and conscious deflation of our dependence upon military instruments and methods in both foreign policy and domestic life. As we wrestle increasingly with fiscal priorities in the interest of greater security for distressed citizens, residents, and ecologies, military spending can no longer be sacrosanct. It must be targeted for significant reductions. Exorbitant military activities, and the budget that sustains them, contribute to environmental decay and constrain domestic spending that might otherwise be directed to collective flourishing and toward mitigating growing economic inequality within our society.

2. We must contend with the fact that we have built a society that intensifies rather than reduces violent harm in many contexts. Militarized animus tends to migrate. It becomes socially and institutionally embedded, creating destructive, attritional synergies between overseas and domestic, state and non-state violence. Military veterans, their families, and casualties of war should move to the forefront of a national focus on remediating the harms of war. This approach must extend to rectifying the corrosive effects of militarized approaches to law and order and public policies that tolerate the distribution of weapons within the United States that have turned many schools, malls, concerts, and nightclubs into scenes of mass slaughter.

3. Most important, we must reestablish public trust and integrity in the political process that underpins the formulation of U.S. foreign policy by restoring transparency, scrupulous cost accounting, and robust and intensive public oversight. In all these domains, Congress must reassert its authority, while adopting an approach that emphasizes clearly defined interests, democratic values, and cooperative, non-military solutions wherever possible.

These times, perhaps more than any in recent memory, call for more, not less robust international solidarity and cooperation, not only in the narrow terms of counterterrorism, but also to combat climate decay, to stop criminal money laundering and global tax evasion, and to relieve the pressures of migrant and refugee emergencies. We will need to advance a broad understanding, throughout American society, that an age of reckless indulgence and executive license in foreign affairs must come to end.

Nikhil Pal Singh is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Quincy Institute, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and History at New York University, and Faculty Director of N.Y.U.'s Prison Education Program.