

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Medea Benjamin

29.03.2019

War, Peace and Presidential Candidates

Posted on [March 28, 2019](#) [March 27, 2019](#)

Forty-five years after Congress passed the War Powers Act in the wake of the Vietnam War, it has finally [used it for the first time](#), to try to end the U.S.-Saudi war on the people of Yemen and to recover its constitutional authority over questions of war and peace. This hasn't stopped the war yet, and President Trump has threatened to veto the bill. But its passage in Congress, and the debate it has spawned, could be an important first step on a tortuous path to a less militarized U.S. foreign policy in Yemen and beyond.

While the United States has been involved in wars throughout much of its history, since the 9/11 attacks the US military has been engaged in [a series of wars](#) that have dragged on for almost two decades. Many refer to them as "endless wars." One of the basic lessons we have all learned from this is that it is easier to start wars than to stop them. So, even as we have come to see this state of war as a kind of "new normal," the American public is wiser, calling for less [military intervention](#) and more congressional oversight.

The rest of the world is wiser about our wars, too. Take the case of Venezuela, where the Trump administration [insists](#) that the military option is "on the table." While some of Venezuela's neighbors are collaborating with US efforts to overthrow the Venezuelan government, none are offering [their own armed forces](#).

The same applies in other regional crises. Iraq is refusing to serve as a staging area for a U.S.-Israeli-Saudi war on Iran. The US's traditional Western allies oppose Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement and want peaceful engagement, not war, with Iran. South Korea is committed to a peace process with North Korea, despite the erratic nature of Trump's negotiations with North Korea's Chairman Kim Jung Un.

So what hope is there that one of the parade of Democrats seeking the presidency in 2020 could be a real "peace candidate"? Could one of them bring an end to these wars and prevent new ones? Walk back the brewing Cold War and arms race with Russia and China? Downsize the US military and its all-consuming budget? Promote diplomacy and a commitment to international law?

Ever since the Bush/Cheney administration launched the present-day "Long Wars," new presidents from both parties have dangled superficial appeals to peace during their election campaigns. But neither Obama nor Trump has seriously tried to end our "endless" wars or rein in our runaway military spending.

Obama's opposition to the Iraq war and vague promises for a new direction were enough to win him the presidency and the [Nobel Peace Prize](#), but not to bring us peace. [In the end](#), he spent more on the military than Bush and dropped more bombs on more countries, including a [tenfold increase](#) in CIA drone strikes. Obama's main innovation was a doctrine of covert and proxy wars that reduced US casualties and muted domestic opposition to war, but brought new violence and chaos to Libya, Syria and Yemen. Obama's escalation in Afghanistan, the fabled "graveyard of empires," turned that war into the longest US war since the [US conquest](#) of Native America (1783-1924).

Trump's election was also boosted by false promises of peace, with recent war veterans delivering [critical votes](#) in the swing states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. But Trump quickly surrounded himself with generals and neocons, [escalated the wars](#) in Iraq, Syria, [Somalia](#) and Afghanistan, and has fully backed the Saudi-led war in Yemen. His hawkish advisers have so far ensured that any US steps toward peace in Syria, Afghanistan or Korea remain symbolic, while US efforts to destabilize Iran and Venezuela threaten the world with new wars. Trump's complaint, ["We don't win any more,"](#) echoes through his presidency, ominously suggesting that he's still looking for a war he can "win."

While we can't guarantee that candidates will stick to their campaign promises, it is important to look at this new crop of presidential candidates and examine their views – and, when possible, voting records – on issues of war and peace. What prospects for peace might each of them bring to the White House?

Bernie Sanders

Senator Sanders has the best voting record of any candidate on war and peace issues, especially on military spending. Opposing the oversized Pentagon budget, he has only voted for 3 out of 19 [military spending bills](#) since 2013. By this measure, no other candidate comes close, including Tulsi Gabbard. In other votes on war and peace, Sanders voted as requested by Peace Action [84% of the time](#) from 2011 to 2016, despite some hawkish votes on Iran from 2011-2013.

One major contradiction in Sanders' opposition to out-of-control military spending has been his [support](#) for the world's most expensive and wasteful weapon system: the trillion-dollar F-35 fighter jet. Not only did Sanders support the F-35, he pushed – despite local opposition – to get these fighter jets stationed at the Burlington airport for the Vermont National Guard.

In terms of stopping the war in Yemen, Sanders has been a hero. Over the past year, he and Senators Murphy and Lee have led a sustained effort to shepherd his historic War Powers bill on Yemen through the Senate. Congressman Ro Khanna, whom Sanders has chosen as one of his 4 campaign co-chairs, has led the parallel effort in the House.

Sanders' 2016 campaign highlighted his popular domestic proposals for universal healthcare and social and economic justice, but was criticized as light on foreign policy. Beyond chiding Clinton for being ["too much into regime change,"](#) he seemed reluctant to debate her on foreign policy, despite her hawkish record. By contrast, during his current presidential run, he regularly includes the Military-Industrial Complex among the entrenched interests his political revolution is confronting, and his voting record backs up his rhetoric.

Sanders supports U.S. withdrawals from Afghanistan and Syria and opposes US threats of war against Venezuela. But his rhetoric on foreign policy sometimes demonizes foreign leaders in ways that unwittingly lend support to the "regime change" policies he opposes – as when he joined a chorus of US politicians labeling Colonel Gaddafi of Libya a ["thug and a murderer,"](#) shortly before U.S.-backed thugs actually murdered Gaddafi.

[Open Secrets](#) shows Sanders taking in over \$366,000 from the "defense industry" during his 2016 presidential campaign, but only \$17,134 for his 2018 Senate reelection campaign.

So our question on Sanders is, "Which Bernie would we see in the White House?" Would it be the one who has the clarity and courage to vote "No" on 84% of military spending bills in

the Senate, or the one who supports military boondoggles like the F-35 and can't resist repeating inflammatory smears of foreign leaders? It is vital that Sanders should appoint genuinely progressive foreign policy advisors to his campaign, and then to his administration, to complement his own greater experience and interest in domestic policy.

Tulsi Gabbard

While most candidates shy away from foreign policy, Congressmember Gabbard has made foreign policy – particularly ending war – the centerpiece of her campaign.

She was truly impressive in her March 10 [CNN Town Hall](#), talking more honestly about US wars than any other presidential candidate in recent history. Gabbard promises to end senseless wars like the one she witnessed as a National Guard officer in Iraq. She unequivocally states her opposition to US "regime change" interventions, as well as the New Cold War and arms race with Russia, and supports rejoining the Iran nuclear deal. She was also an original cosponsor of Congressman Ro Khanna's Yemen War Powers bill.

But Gabbard's actual voting record on war and peace issues, especially on military spending, is not nearly as dovish as Sanders'. She voted for 19 of 29 [military spending bills](#) in the past 6 years, and she has only a [51% Peace Action voting record](#). Many of the votes that Peace Action counted against her were votes to fully fund controversial new weapons systems, including nuclear-tipped cruise missiles (in 2014, 2015 and 2016); an 11th US aircraft-carrier (in 2013 and 2015); and various parts of Obama's anti-ballistic missile program, which fueled the New Cold War and arms race she now decries.

Gabbard voted at least twice (in 2015 and 2016) not to repeal the much-abused 2001 [Authorization for the Use of Military Force](#), and she voted three times not to limit the use of Pentagon slush funds. In 2016, she voted against an amendment to cut the military budget by just 1%. Gabbard received \$8,192 in ["defense" industry](#) contributions for her 2018 reelection campaign.

Gabbard still believes in a militarized approach to counterterrorism, despite [studies](#) showing that this feeds a self-perpetuating cycle of violence on both sides.

She is still in the military herself and embraces what she calls a "military mindset." She ended her CNN Town Hall by saying that being Commander-in-Chief is the most important part of being president. As with Sanders, we have to ask, "Which Tulsi would we see in the White House?" Would it be the Major with the military mindset, who cannot bring herself to deprive her military colleagues of new weapons systems or even a 1% cut from the trillions of dollars in military spending she has voted for? Or would it be the veteran who has seen the horrors of war and is determined to bring the troops home and never again send them off to kill and be killed in endless regime change wars?

Elizabeth Warren

Elizabeth Warren made her reputation with her bold challenges of our nation's economic inequality and corporate greed, and has slowly started to stake out her foreign policy positions. Her campaign website says that she supports "cutting our bloated defense budget and ending the stranglehold of defense contractors on our military policy." But, like Gabbard, she has voted to approve over two-thirds of the "bloated" [military spending](#) bills that have come before her in the Senate.

Her website also says, "It's time to bring the troops home," and that she supports "reinvesting in diplomacy." She has come out in favor of the US rejoining the [Iran nuclear agreement](#) and has also proposed legislation that would prevent the United States from using nuclear weapons as a first-strike option, saying she wants to "reduce the chances of a nuclear miscalculation."

Her [Peace Action voting record](#) exactly matches Sanders' for the shorter time she has sat in the Senate, and she was one of the first five Senators to cosponsor his Yemen War Powers

bill in March 2018. Warren took in \$34,729 in "[Defense](#)" [industry](#) contributions for her 2018 Senate reelection campaign.

With regards to Israel, the Senator angered many of her liberal constituents when, in 2014, she [supported](#) Israel's invasion of Gaza that left over 2,000 dead, and blamed the civilian casualties on Hamas. She has since taken a more critical position. She [opposed](#) a bill to criminalize boycotting Israel and condemned Israel's use of deadly force against peaceful Gaza protesters in 2018.

Warren is following where Sanders has led on issues from universal healthcare to challenging inequality and corporate, plutocratic interests, and she is also following him on Yemen and other war and peace issues. But as with Gabbard, Warren's votes to approve 68% of [military spending bills](#) reveal a lack of conviction on tackling the very obstacle she acknowledges: "the stranglehold of defense contractors on our military policy."

Kamala Harris

Senator Harris announced her candidacy for president in [a lengthy speech](#) in her native Oakland, CA, where she addressed a wide range of issues, but failed to mention US wars or military spending at all. Her only reference to foreign policy was a vague statement about "democratic values," "authoritarianism" and "nuclear proliferation," with no hint that the US has contributed to any of those problems. Either she's not interested in foreign or military policy, or she's afraid to talk about her positions, especially in her hometown in the heart of Barbara Lee's progressive congressional district.

One issue Harris has been vocal about in other settings is her unconditional support for Israel. She told an [AIPAC conference](#) in 2017, "I will do everything in my power to ensure broad and bipartisan support for Israel's security and right to self-defense." She demonstrated how far she would take that support for Israel when President Obama finally allowed the US to join a UN Security Council resolution condemning illegal Israeli settlements in occupied Palestine as a "flagrant violation" of international law. Harris, Booker and Klobuchar were among 30 Democratic (and 47 Republican) Senators who [cosponsored a bill](#) to withhold US dues to the UN over the resolution.

Faced with grassroots pressure to #SkipAIPAC in 2019, Harris did join most of the other presidential candidates who chose not to speak at AIPAC's 2019 gathering. She also supports rejoining the Iran nuclear agreement.

In her short time in the Senate, Harris has voted for six out of eight [military spending bills](#), but she did cosponsor and vote for Sanders' Yemen War Powers bill. Harris was not up for reelection in 2018, but took in \$26,424 in "[Defense](#)" [industry](#) contributions in the 2018 election cycle.

Kirsten Gillibrand

After Senator Sanders, Senator Gillibrand has the second best record on opposing runaway [military spending](#), voting against 47% of military spending bills since 2013. Her [Peace Action voting record](#) is 80%, reduced mainly by the same hawkish votes on Iran as Sanders from 2011 to 2013. There is nothing on Gillibrand's campaign website about wars or military spending, despite serving on the Armed Services Committee. She took in \$104,685 in "[defense](#)" [industry](#) contributions for her 2018 reelection campaign, more than any other senator running for president.

Gillibrand was an early cosponsor of Sanders' Yemen War Powers bill. She has also supported a full withdrawal from Afghanistan since at least 2011, when she worked on [a withdrawal bill](#) with then Senator Barbara Boxer and wrote a letter to Secretaries Gates and Clinton, asking for a firm commitment that US troops would be out "no later than 2014."

Gillibrand cosponsored the Anti-Israel Boycott Act in 2017 but later withdrew her cosponsorship when pushed by grassroots opponents and the ACLU, and she voted against S.I, which included similar provisions, in January 2019. She has spoken favorably of

Trump's diplomacy with North Korea. Originally a Blue Dog Democrat from rural upstate New York in the House, she has become more liberal as a Senator for New York state and now, as a presidential candidate.

Cory Booker

Senator Booker has voted for 16 out of 19 [military spending bills](#) in the Senate. He also describes himself as a "staunch advocate for a strengthened relationship with Israel," and he cosponsored the Senate bill condemning the UN Security Council resolution against Israeli settlements in 2016. He was an original cosponsor of a bill to impose new sanctions on Iran in December 2013, before eventually voting for the nuclear agreement in 2015.

Like Warren, Booker was one of the first five cosponsors of Sanders' Yemen War Powers bill, and he has an 86% [Peace Action voting record](#). But despite serving on the Foreign Affairs Committee, he has not taken a [public position](#) for ending America's wars or cutting its record military spending. His record of voting for 84% of military spending bills suggests he would not make major cuts. Booker was not up for reelection in 2018, but received \$50,078 in ["defense" industry](#) contributions for the 2018 election cycle.

Amy Klobuchar

Senator Klobuchar is the most unapologetic hawk of the senators in the race. She has voted for all but one, or 95%, of the [military spending bills](#) since 2013. She has only voted as requested by Peace Action [69% of the time](#), the lowest among senators running for president. Klobuchar supported the U.S-NATO-led regime change war in Libya in 2011, and her public statements suggest that her main condition for the US use of military force anywhere is that US allies also take part, as in Libya.

In January 2019, Klobuchar was the only presidential candidate who voted for S.1, a bill to reauthorize US military aid to Israel that also included an anti-BDS provision to allow US state and local governments to divest from companies that boycott Israel. She is the only Democratic presidential candidate in the Senate who did not cosponsor Sanders' Yemen War Powers bill in 2018, but she did cosponsor and vote for it in 2019. Klobuchar received \$17,704 in ["defense" industry](#) contributions for her 2018 reelection campaign.

Beto O'Rourke

Former Congressman O'Rourke voted for 20 out of 29 [military spending bills](#) (69%) since 2013, and had an 84% [Peace Action voting record](#). Most of the votes Peace Action counted against him were votes opposing specific cuts in the military budget. Like Tulsi Gabbard, he voted for an 11th aircraft-carrier in 2015, and against an overall 1% cut in the military budget in 2016. He voted against reducing the number of US troops in Europe in 2013 and he twice voted against placing limits on a Navy slush fund. O'Rourke was a member of the House Armed Services Committee, and he took in \$111,210 from the ["defense" industry](#) for his Senate campaign, more than any other Democratic presidential candidate.

Despite an obvious affinity with military-industrial interests, of which there are many throughout Texas, O'Rourke has not highlighted foreign or military policy in his Senate or presidential campaigns, suggesting that this is something he would like to downplay. In Congress, he was a member of the corporate New Democrat Coalition that progressives see as a tool of plutocratic and corporate interests.

John Delaney

Former Congressman Delaney provides an alternative to Senator Klobuchar at the hawkish end of the spectrum, after voting for 25 out of 28 [military spending bills](#) since 2013, and earning a 53% [Peace Action voting record](#). He took in \$23,500 from ["Defense" interests](#) for his last Congressional campaign, and, like O'Rourke and Inslee, he was a member of the corporate New Democrat Coalition.

Jay Inslee

Jay Inslee, the Governor of Washington State, served in Congress from 1993-1995 and from 1999-2012. Inslee was a strong opponent of the US war in Iraq, and introduced a bill to impeach Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez for approving torture by US forces. Like O'Rourke and Delaney, Inslee was a member of the New Democrat Coalition of corporate Democrats, but also a strong voice for action on climate change. In his 2010 reelection campaign, he took in \$27,250 in ["defense" industry](#) contributions. Inslee's campaign is very focused on climate change, and his campaign website so far does not mention foreign or military policy at all.

Marianne Williamson and Andrew Yang

These two candidates from outside the world of politics both bring refreshing ideas to the presidential contest. Spiritual teacher [Williamson believes](#), "Our country's way of dealing with security issues is obsolete. We cannot simply rely on brute force to rid ourselves of international enemies." She recognizes that, on the contrary, the US militarized foreign policy creates enemies, and our huge military budget "simply increase(s) the coffers of the military-industrial complex." She writes, "The only way to make peace with your neighbors is to make peace with your neighbors."

Williamson proposes a 10 or 20 year plan to transform our wartime economy into a "peacetime economy." "From massive investment in the development of clean energy, to the retrofitting of our buildings and bridges, to the building of new schools and the creation of a green manufacturing base," she writes, "it is time to release this powerful sector of American genius to the work of promoting life instead of death."

Entrepreneur Andrew [Yang promises](#) to "bring our military spending under control," to "make it harder for the US to get involved in foreign engagements with no clear goal," and to "reinvest in diplomacy." He believes that much of the military budget "is focused on defending against threats from decades ago as opposed to the threats of 2020." But he defines all these problems in terms of foreign "threats" and US military responses to them, failing to recognize that US militarism is itself a serious threat to many of our neighbors.

Julian Castro, Pete Buttigieg and John Hickenlooper

Neither Julian Castro, Pete Buttigieg nor John Hickenlooper mention foreign or military policy on their campaign websites at all.

Joe Biden

Although Biden has yet to throw his hat into the ring, he is already [making videos](#) and [speeches](#) trying to tout his foreign policy expertise. Biden has been engaged in foreign policy since he won a Senate seat in 1972, eventually chairing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for four years, and becoming Obama's vice president. Echoing traditional mainstream Democratic rhetoric, he accuses Trump of abandoning US global leadership and wants to see the US regain its place as the "[indispensable leader](#) of the free world."

Biden presents himself as a pragmatist, [saying](#) that he opposed the Vietnam War not because he considered it immoral but because he thought it wouldn't work. Biden at first endorsed full-scale nation-building in Afghanistan but when he saw it wasn't working, he changed his mind, arguing that the US military should destroy Al Qaeda and then leave. As vice president, he was a lonely voice in the Cabinet opposing [Obama's escalation](#) of the war in 2009.

Regarding Iraq, however, he was a hawk. He repeated [false intelligence claims](#) that Saddam Hussein possessed [chemical](#) and [biological weapons](#) and was seeking [nuclear weapons](#), and therefore was a threat that had to be "[eliminated](#)." He later called his vote for the 2003 invasion a "[mistake](#)."

Biden is a self-described [Zionist](#). He has [stated](#) that the Democrats' support for Israel "comes from our gut, moves through our heart, and ends up in our head. It's almost genetic."

There is one issue, however, where he would disagree with the present Israeli government, and that is on Iran. He wrote that “War with Iran is not just a bad option. It would be a [disaster](#),” and he supported Obama’s entry into the Iran nuclear agreement. He would therefore likely support reentering it if he were president.

While Biden emphasizes diplomacy, he favors the NATO alliance so that "[when we have to fight](#), we are not fighting alone." He ignores that NATO outlived its original Cold War purpose and has perpetuated and expanded its ambitions on a global scale since the 1990s – and that this has predictably ignited a new Cold War with Russia and China.

Despite paying lip service to international law and diplomacy, Biden sponsored the McCain-Biden Kosovo Resolution, which authorized the US to lead the NATO assault on Yugoslavia and invasion of Kosovo in 1999. This was the first major war in which the US and NATO used force in violation of the UN Charter in the post-Cold War era, establishing the dangerous precedent that led to all our post-9/11 wars.

Like many other corporate Democrats, Biden champions a misleadingly benign view of the dangerous and destructive role the US has played in the world over the past 20 years, under the Democratic administration in which he served as vice-president as well as under Republican ones.

Biden might support slight cuts in the Pentagon budget, but he is not likely to challenge the military-industrial complex he has served for so long in any significant way. He does, however, know the trauma of war firsthand, [connecting](#) his son’s exposure to military burn pits while serving in Iraq and Kosovo to his fatal brain cancer, which might make him think twice about launching new wars.

On the other hand, Biden’s long experience and skill as an advocate for the military-industrial complex and the US’s militarized foreign policy suggest that those influences might well outweigh even his own personal tragedy if he is elected president and faced with critical choices between war and peace.

Conclusion

The United States has been at war for over 17 years, and we are spending most of our national tax revenues to pay for these wars and the forces and weapons to wage them. It would be foolish to think that presidential candidates who have little or nothing to say about this state of affairs will, out of the blue, come up with a brilliant plan to reverse course once we install them in the White House. It is especially disturbing that Gillibrand and O’Rourke, the two candidates most beholden to the military-industrial complex for campaign funding in 2018, are eerily quiet on these urgent questions.

But even the candidates who are vowing to tackle this crisis of militarism are doing so in ways that leave serious questions unanswered. Not one of them has said how much they would cut the record military budget that makes these wars possible – and thus almost inevitable.

In 1989, at the end of the Cold War, former Pentagon officials Robert McNamara and Larry Korb told the Senate Budget Committee that the US military budget could safely be [cut by 50%](#) over the next 10 years. That obviously never happened, and our military spending under Bush II, Obama and Trump [has outstripped](#) the peak spending of the Cold War arms race.

In 2010, Barney Frank and three colleagues from both parties convened a [Sustainable Defense Task Force](#) that recommended a 25% cut in military spending. The Green Party has endorsed [a 50% cut](#) in today’s military budget. That sounds radical, but, because inflation-adjusted spending is now higher than in 1989, that would still leave us with a larger military budget than MacNamara and Korb called for in 1989.

Presidential campaigns are key moments for raising these issues. We are greatly encouraged by Tulsi Gabbard’s courageous decision to place solving the crisis of war and militarism at the heart of her presidential campaign. We thank Bernie Sanders for voting against the

obscenely bloated military budget year after year, and for identifying the military-industrial complex as one of the most powerful interest groups that his political revolution must confront. We applaud Elizabeth Warren for condemning "the stranglehold of defense contractors on our military policy." And we welcome Marianne Williamson, Andrew Yang and other original voices to this debate.

But we need to hear a much more vigorous debate about war and peace in this campaign, with more specific plans from all the candidates. This vicious cycle of US wars, militarism and runaway military spending drains our resources, corrupts our national priorities and undermines international cooperation, including on the existential dangers of climate change and nuclear weapons proliferation, which no country can solve on its own.

We are calling for this debate most of all because we mourn the millions of people being killed by our country's wars and we want the killing to stop. If you have other priorities, we understand and respect that. But unless and until we address militarism and all the money it sucks out of our national coffers, it may well prove impossible to solve the other very serious problems facing the United States and the world in the 21st century.

Medea Benjamin is cofounder of [CODEPINK](#) for Peace, and author of several books, including [Kingdom of the Unjust: Behind the US-Saudi Connection](#). Nicolas J. S. Davies is the author of [Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq](#) and a researcher with CODEPINK.