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U.S. Militarism and the One-Sided Class War



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Despite capitalism's internal contradictions, it can sustain itself in various forms – even fascism is a capitalist construct – as long as the bourgeois class is a “class for itself” and the working class is subjectively reduced to non-existence as a political force because of its lack of class consciousness. The various methods with which the rulers are able to leverage ideological consent from the oppressed don't necessarily require extensive study of Gramsci, although it would help. Rather, it is only necessary to remind ourselves of the very simple but accurate observation provided by Marx that the dominant ideas of any society reflect the ideas of its dominant class.

While the modalities of how an increasingly small ruling element can sustain its rule in the midst of an ongoing capitalist crisis are an interesting and, indeed, critical subject, it is not the subject of this short essay. I will instead just focus on one issue unfolding in the public domain that I believe serves as an example of how this ideological feat is pulled off – the debate, or more actually, non-debate on militarism and the military budget.

Last week, as the public was being prepped for the first Democrat party debates in that ESPN style of reporting that now dominates at CNN and other cable stations which frame such political events as the debates as entertainment spectacles, the Senate passed (with the support of 36 Democrats), the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) by a vote of 86 to 8 that gave the Trump administration \$750 billion for the war machine – an increase that makes this military budget the largest in U.S. history. Only five Democrats voted against the bill; six others including Senator Sanders and Warren failed to vote because they were on the campaign trail running for President.

The \$750 billion that the Senate approved will only have to be reconciled with the \$733 billion military budget that the House had already indicated it will support. The \$733 billion figure would also represent an historic increase in military spending and will be the third increase since Trump took office.

The military budget Trump inherited already eclipsed the military spending of China, Russia, France, India, the United Kingdom, and Japan combined. The \$619 billion in 2016 under Obama grew to \$700 billion in 2018 under Trump, then to an even more bloated \$716 billion in 2019 and the \$750 billion passed by the Senate on June 26. It would be tempting to suggest that it was only “Russiagate” that explains how someone who the Democrats claim to fundamentally oppose could, nevertheless, win bipartisan support for his request for increases in military spending that he even characterized as “crazy.”

As unstable as Trump is alleged to be, Democrats rejected calls from many quarters to oppose the administration’s inclusion in the NDAA to develop “usable” nuclear weapons as part of the drive to incorporate their tactical use. So-called usable nuclear weapons, lower-yield devices that can theoretically be used like conventional bombs, are now being advanced as a necessary part of the mainline “defense” strategy. Among the many problems with this position, the biggest is that this strategy has nothing to do with defense and everything to do with enhancing the capacity for a “nuclear first strike.”

Interestingly, not only was opposition from Democrats MIA, but the lopsided vote indicates that they have fully embraced this insane policy that was first proposed under Barack Obama.

Senate Democrats even allowed Trump to get away with misappropriating billions of dollars granted by Congress to the Pentagon and divert the cash to construct the border wall by reimbursing the Pentagon for the use of those funds without any penalties. An offense, by the way, that could arguably be impeachable.

Why the bipartisanship on the military budget? The easy answer is that both parties share the strategic commitment to maintain U.S. global hegemony against all rivals, but especially against China and Russia, represented in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) document.

The NSS under Trump does not depart from the goals of previous administrations during the post-Cold War period. However, it does represent a more intense commitment to the use of coercive force to offset the gains being made by their capitalist rivals, mainly China and Russia. Though not directly referenced in the NSS, the Trump forces are now concerned with competition from the European Union, as it is being seen as an instrument and expression of the interests of German capital and the growing calls in Europe for an independent military force.

But all of this still begs the question: if the Republicans are supposed to be the party of war and the Democrats the sophisticated global cosmopolitans committed to peace, multilateralism and international law, why wouldn't the Democrat party's popular base react more vigorously to oppose the obscene squandering of public resources for the military?

There are two elements to this as an explanation. One I alluded to already, the diversionary impact of Russiagate, with the other element being the dramatic shift to the right in the consciousness of the Democrat party base as a result of the ideological influence of the Obama administration and Obama himself.

It continues to be a mistake by left and progressive forces to underestimate the ideological impact of Obama's administration.

Unlike during the George W. Bush presidency when progressive and radical forces were in open opposition to the state, Obama lulled progressive forces to sleep and disarmed radicals, especially white radicals, who were reluctant to oppose his reactionary policies.

Obama's ideological influence wasn't just that he legitimized neoliberalism and the class and race interests it represented, but that he obscured those interests and the anti-people character of neoliberalism. Obama gave a respectability to policies that in an earlier era would have been seen as odious. From the support for coups in Honduras, Egypt, Ukraine and Brazil to the extra-judicial murder of U.S. citizens, including Abdulrahman al-Awlaki (the 16 year-old son of Anwar al-Awlaki), the U.S. citizen murdered two weeks earlier, Obama was able to avoid the condemnation of his policies.

The dismaying result of Obama being in office is that it completely broke down the natural skepticism that is necessary in a state and society that is ruled by a minority elite. For many of Obama's supporters, if he declared individuals or an entire nation terrorists, they blindly accepted it without demanding any evidence whatsoever.

Nevertheless, the ideological impact of the Obama years would have been mitigated if his policies had been given a full and critical assessment by the media. However, the private corporate media establishment has not only been incorporated as part of the state's ideological apparatus, it has also been integrated into the partisan struggles among the ruling elite.

This collusion between the transnational rulers and the media continues in favor of the Democrats. Not able to successfully execute a constitutional coup, the capitalist establishment decided to use Russiagate to press for alterations in Trump's nationalist program and to divert public attention away from the ongoing governmental decisions that were being delivered by the duopoly in their favor.

This is the context that informs what surfaces publicly or is allowed to be debated by mainstream politicians, even the new "radicals" in the Democrat party. For the centrists and the progressives, the issue of military spending and the ongoing wars represent issues that have not yet been designated as "debatable."

War and militarism are class issues. It is the poor and working classes that have always fought the wars. The 60% of the federal discretionary budget that is now devoted to war and militarism means that all of the human rights of the people from housing to health care must be addressed in the 40% of the budget that remains.

This is class war. Not only the stealing of the surpluses from the people's labor but the misappropriation of state spending for the special corporate interests that control electoral politics and the state.

We can reverse this. But we must present clear demands in order that these issues are addressed in the public square.

We must, for example, demand that all those running for office support efforts to initially cut the military budget by 50 percent and reallocate government spending to fully fund social programs and realize individual and collective human rights in areas of housing, education, healthcare, green jobs and public transportation. That they Oppose the Department of Defense 1033 program that transfers millions of dollars' worth of military equipment to local police forces. That they advocate for the closing of the 800-plus U.S. foreign military bases and the ending of U.S. participation in the white supremacist NATO military structure. That they call for and work toward closing the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) and withdrawal of all U.S. military personnel from Africa.

And finally, with the insanity of the drive toward nuclear war, they must sponsor legislation and/or resolutions at every level of government calling on the U.S. to support the United Nations resolution on the complete global abolishment of nuclear weapons passed by 122 nations in July 2017.

The class war that we are losing in the U.S. has consequences not only for the working class in the U.S. but the oppressed nations and peoples across the planet. This is a responsibility that we can no longer fail to live up to.

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