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De-Militarizing the United States



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

More than a half-century ago, exactly one year before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. brilliantly identified the keys to the American political, economic, and social crisis that has worsened over the years. At the Riverside Church in New York City, King linked the militarism of the Vietnam War; the racism of American society; and the inequality and materialism of the American economy to demand a movement toward social justice that we seek today. The central civil rights leaders of the time, including Ralph Bunch, asked King to radically alter the speech and to dissociate racism from the Vietnam War. The central newspapers of the time, including the New York Times and

the Washington Post, maligned the speech, terming it an “oversimplification” that would hurt both the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. Fifty-three years later, we are still trying to solve the ills of racism, militarism, and materialism that beg for social justice.

King courageously referred to the United States as the “greatest purveyor of violence in the world,” and today we face two decades of permanent war that have cost blood and treasure. King believed the resources spent on the Vietnam War should have been devoted to social welfare at home. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his Cross of Iron speech in 1953, argued similarly that “every gun that is made, every warship launched” is “theft from those who hunger and are not fed—those who are cold and are not clothed.” Eisenhower gave the speech several weeks after the death of Joseph Stalin, warning of the tremendous costs associated with the rivalry with the Soviet Union. We continue to exaggerate the threats from overseas (see China) to justify bloated defense budgets that restrict economic and social investment.

The reliance on military instruments of power to implement foreign policy has expanded the role of the Department of Defense at the expense of the Department of State. The State Department’s budget is less than one-tenth of the defense budget, and smaller than the budget of the intelligence community. There are more soldiers and sailors in military marching bands than there are Foreign Service Officers. The decline of the Agency for International Development, and President Bill Clinton’s dissolution of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the United States Information Service have contributed to the overall decline of civilian influence in national security policy. John Quincy Adams warned against going abroad “in search of monsters to destroy,” which is exactly what we have done in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Ironically, the increased militarization of U.S. policy began in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which should have inspired a debate on the need for a new national security strategy. Instead, the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama catered to the military, appointed too many general and flag officers to positions that should be in the hands of civilians, and failed to control spending on weapons of war. Donald Trump went further than his predecessors in this regard, although it turned out that his generals became the “adults in the room,” and were replaced by such civilian “Chicken Hawks” as John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike

Pompeo. Trump's hands-off style toward the military has been worsened by his "war cabinet."

Pompeo and former national security adviser Bolton killed arms control and disarmament and thus provided a tremendous boost to militarization of national security policy. They successfully lobbied for the destruction of the Iran nuclear accord, the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Open Skies Treaty; they dragged their heels on renewing the New START Treaty, which expires in January 2021. Their legacy may eventually include the death of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in view of Trump's interest in conducting the first U.S. nuclear test since 1992, when Washington followed Moscow's lead and joined a moratorium on nuclear-weapons testing. A U.S. resumption of testing would be the death knell for the Nonproliferation Treaty, which finds the non-nuclear signers impatient with the failure of nuclear powers to disarm.

The militarization of the intelligence community, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency, has contributed to the misuse of force. The CIA helped to make a specious case for war against Iraq, citing nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and nonexistent links between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. The CIA cherry-picked intelligence to support the use of force and corrupted the intelligence process to convince Congress and the American people of the need for war. No senior CIA official protested, let alone resigned, in the wake of the misuse of intelligence or in response to the sadistic torture and abuse program of the war on terror. Meanwhile, the CIA has become a paramilitary organization, and has stepped up its recruitment of military veterans. The hiring of military veterans by the police is similarly noteworthy.

When the Pentagon ended up with weapons of war that were no longer needed, the Clinton administration found a way to distribute armored personnel carriers, submachine guns, and even grenade launchers to urban police departments, which began to look like forces of occupation and not community support. The use of tear gas, which was developed by the U.S. Army for riot control in 1919 and is prohibited by various international treaties, was widely used against protestors in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. National Guard helicopters were used in Washington to rout peaceful protestors by using low flying techniques to create dangerous downdrafts, a technique developed to rout insurgents in such places as Iraq. Recent studies indicate that police departments, which were given sophisticated military equipment in the 1990s, were more likely to have violent encounters with the public, regardless of local crime rates.

Militarized police units, moreover, were more frequently deployed to African-American communities, even after controlling for local crime rates.

In addition to the use of military weapons and techniques to implement domestic security, there has been police misuse of intelligence surveillance at home. In January 2020, an African-American man in Detroit became the first U.S. citizen to be arrested as a result of a false facial recognition match. Police departments have used facial recognition systems for the past two decades, but recent studies have demonstrated that the technology is not accurate for people of color due to a lack of diversity in the images used to develop the underlying databases. The case in Detroit involved a combination of flawed technology and poor police work. Fortunately, the American Civil Liberties Union is working to end the use of invasive surveillance technologies as the Congress grapples awkwardly with police reform in the wake of mindless police killings in Minnesota, Colorado, and Kentucky.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the New York police department hired a former deputy director for operations at the CIA, David Cohen, as a deputy police commissioner for intelligence. Cohen immediately initiated police surveillance of public events, and declared that the police department was not required to have a “specific indication” of a crime before investigating. In granting the city’s surveillance requests, a federal judge ruled that the dangers of terrorism “outweigh any First Amendment cost.” As a result, the police department was authorized to conduct investigations of political, social, and religious groups. The Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security orchestrated the use of drones in fifteen cities to collect intelligence against peaceful protests after the Floyd murder. In a violation of the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act, this information was passed to the FBI for law enforcement purposes.

King’s voice was prescient in linking the costs of overseas military adventurism; social and economic inequality; and institutional racism. His voice had support over the past century. When Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1933, he told advisors that the United States needed a new vision of domestic security, that we were “trapped in the ice of our own indifference.” When Eisenhower left the presidency in 1961, he warned about the dangers of unchecked and unmonitored congressional support for defense spending, intelligence spending, and homeland security. And in 1999, George F. Kennan, the author of our Cold War containment strategy against the Soviet Union, warned about over-reliance on the military in U.S. decision making. The sooner we

grapple with the militarization of our society at home and abroad, the sooner we will be able to address the ills that militarism has wrought.

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