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The Militarized Academy: Knowledge for What?



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The American military's relationship with universities and colleges began in almost an absence of mind. It arose from an afterthought stipulation in the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 that institutions to be financed under the terms of the act through income from the sale of federal lands must offer military training as part of the curriculum. For three-quarters of a century, little of note developed from this beginning, but following World War II, the university-military collaboration became a vital feature of American society. Amid the unending tensions of the postwar era, Americans' call for their universities to service national policy priorities-especially some that required or made use of secrecy and deception-would put at risk higher education's own priorities for promoting honest and independent scholarship and teaching.

– [Richard M Abrams](#)

This article is another in my [series](#) examining the underbelly of the military industrial complex (MIC). My aim is to discover reasons for the vast silence or support for the military. Some is due to the culture of militarism, some to fear of dissenting, and some to distractions. Another, economic interests, are highly implicated, yet many of these are barely visible. The political and economic clout of the weapons industry has been well publicized in [TomDispatch](#), the [Center for International Policy](#), and the recent book by Christian Sorenson, *Understanding the War Industry*. On the other hand, we rarely hear about the millions who chew off the fat of the land (the Department of Defense [DoD] and related agencies' budget) in construction, intelligence, transportation, the food industries, small businesses of all kinds, state and local governments, public schools, economic development commissions, arts, charities, environmental and other nonprofit organizations, and public and private universities and colleges worldwide. (I would love to recruit more investigators; send me email for useful sources.)

In the academic world there are Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs, taught by military and civilian faculty, training of foreign military and civic leaders, and other channels of military influence such as the Intelligence Community Scholars Program. Many trustees and executives have military connections, and institutions don't shun the lucrative weapons corporations investments. The enormous network of military institutes, e.g., the Naval War College, increasingly collaborate with our apparently "civilian" universities. Another aspect, the militarization of science research, is the main issue here. It is not new, but current developments deserve a look.

Public universities, private universities, colleges and junior colleges receive enormous DoD research contracts. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) usually leads the pack with annual funds in billions. Weapons corporations funding is also greatly welcomed by our higher education institutions.

In the hard and soft sciences, research is often conducted by consortia, some international. For example, the Information Warfare Research Project ([IWRP](#)) has members from small information technology companies, large ones such as Accenture and Amazon, nonprofits like Draper Laboratory, and academia, e.g., Southern Methodist University and University of Florida. To insure that no state is left behind, the DoD has a [program](#), the [Defense Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research](#), to search "underrepresented U.S. states and territories for researchers with important contributions to [DOD's] scientific enterprise."

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) biodefense strategy program, [PREEMPT](#), contracts with teams modeling specific diseases to assess the risk of spillover from animals into human contacts. The teams include, among many others, the Australian Animal Health Laboratory, the University of California, the University of Glasgow, Institut Pasteur, University of Cambridge, University of Tartu (Estonia), the Pirbright Institute (UK),

and Cornell University. (Other DARPA projects are discussed in Roelofs, [The Science of Lethality](#), and the Agency is illuminated in Annie Jacobson's book, *[The Pentagon's Brain: An Uncensored History of DARPA, America's Top-Secret Military Research Agency](#)*.)

DARPA's futuristic research (e.g., insect drones, cyborgs) is attractive to scientific minds that even at the pre-college level have been inundated with praise for the military applications of science. Elementary and high schools, as well as youth organizations, offer Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education funded by military contractors and the DoD. This includes robotics programs, experiments, and contests that are lots of fun. For example, at the University of Mary Washington's Dahlgren campus members of the Naval Surface Warfare Center instruct middle and high school teachers in [SeaPerch](#), an "innovative underwater robotics program that equips teachers and students with the resources they need to build an underwater Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) in an inschool or out-of-school setting." Military personnel and volunteer weapons corporation employees also provide tutoring and mentoring at public schools throughout the country, especially those in low income and minority neighborhoods. Junior ROTC programs offer the military perspective in thousands of schools, including the six public schools in Chicago that are military academies. Militarized science education at all levels aims to provide researchers for the MIC, but it has other effects. Well-funded programs and departments draw students away from civilian applications, especially as universities seek military funds to revive their declining budgets. Scholarships and internships are very attractive to today's career-minded students, and those offered in partnership with organizations such as the American Association of University Women imply that military work is a feminist triumph. Even fields such as environmental studies now have military interest and funding. Traditional liberal arts departments are eliminated or marginalized.

Whether or not students eventually work in the MIC, those exposed to militarized education are more likely to accept the domestic role and worldwide activities of the military as legitimate and necessary. Militarism is normalized, and often, admired. Scientists who remain in academia are under pressure to conform, and some enthusiastically impart military values to the next generation of students.

The Science Council of Japan has recently renewed its [opposition](#) to war research, mentioning "remorse for the scientist community's past cooperation with war efforts and a deep concern for a possible resurgence of similar situations." The US [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) originated "calling for scientific research to be directed away from military technologies and toward solving pressing environmental and social problems." Nevertheless, there are few voices of dissent in academia or among progressives, leftists, liberal churches, environmentalists, and journalists. Writers who draw attention to the militarization of academic science are rare; notable are Sorenson's *[Understanding the War Industry](#)*, Nick

Turse's *The Complex* (2008), and Henry Giroux's "[The Politics of Higher Education and the Militarized Academy after 9/11.](#)"

The worldwide funding of DoD research is even less publicized. Outsourcing is not done to save money, but to supplement the local knowledge with the brains of the world. Thus is created a worldwide network of DoD collaborators, scientific elites in many countries with a cozy relationship with the US military who may have considerable influence on their nation's politics and educational systems. Contracts and consortia are heavy in the fields of information technology, nanotechnology, biotechnology, and weapons, but anything goes. Universities, institutes, laboratories, and scientists are employed in Kenya, France, UK, Peru, New Zealand, Thailand, Republic of Georgia, and elsewhere. Some examples: "Engineering of highly proficient catalytic bioscavengers for in vivo detoxification of a broad spectrum of nerve agents" (Israel); "Behavioural ecology of cetaceans" (Scotland); "Training . . . animal health professionals in epidemiology which will enhance the ability to prepare for and respond to disease outbreaks" (Laos).

Environmental protection and restoration is now a subject of interest to the military.

Consequently, there are some surprising collaborations in DoD projects. One of these, at [Joint Base Lewis-McChord](#), on Puget Sound, is to eliminate the "threat" to live-fire exercises and other missions coming *from* imperiled species and incompatible development. "The acquisition of buffer land will enable prairie habitat restoration, and easements on agricultural land will allow working farms those uses that are compatible with the military mission." The partners for this project include Evergreen State College, Oregon Zoo, Sustainability in Prisons, The Nature Conservancy, Washington Veterans Conservation Corps, and Wolf Haven International.

Among the several environmental agencies in the DoD, the Strategic Environmental Research and Development [Program](#) is concerned not only with watershed health, endangered species, invasive species, and behavioral ecology of cetaceans, but even has a project for "Energy and Water Efficiency Improvements for Dishrooms in Military Dining Rooms."

Environmental research is also funded internationally, with DoD contracts in Canada, Germany, UK, Australia and elsewhere. (Much information on the MIC underbelly is available at the user-friendly government contracts database www.usaspending.gov Filters can be applied for funding agency, recipient, location, subject and many others including the contractors in your zip code.)

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has its own research programs, implemented in Western Europe and former iron curtain countries, now all under the uranium curtain. NATO has a huge bureaucracy of agencies and programs; researchers, instructors, and trainees are from both civilian and military sectors.

The [Science for Peace and Security](#) (SPS) Programme promotes dialogue and practical cooperation between NATO member states and partner nations based on scientific research,

technological innovation and knowledge exchange. [It funds research on the expected military topics, but also] security issues arising from key environmental and resource constraints, including health risks, climate change, water scarcity and increasing energy needs, which have the potential to significantly affect NATO's planning and operations; disaster forecasting and prevention of natural catastrophes; and defence-related environmental issues.

NATO has 33 Partnership Training and Education Centres, some in NATO member nations and others in partnership countries, which includes "Partnership for Peace" members such as Sweden and Finland, and worldwide partners, for example, Israel, Mongolia, and Colombia. The inclusive reach of NATO's interests is evidenced in the Public Affairs Regional [Centre](#) in the Republic of North Macedonia, to provide. "Capacity Building in Public Affairs, instrumental for enhancing resilience and addressing vulnerabilities related to hybrid security threats such as disinformation and propaganda."

Twenty-five NATO [Centres of Excellence](#) "train and educate leaders and specialists from NATO member and partner countries, assist in doctrine development, identify lessons learned, improve interoperability and capabilities, and test and validate concepts through experimentation." For example, the NATO Strategic Communications [Centre](#) of Excellence based in Riga, Latvia:

contributes to improved strategic communications capabilities within the Alliance and Allied nations. Strategic communication is an integral part of the efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives. The heart of the NATO StratCom COE is a diverse group of international experts with military, government and academic backgrounds – trainers, educators, analysts and researchers.

A typical researcher heads the Political Science Doctoral Studies Programme at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, reporting on "The People's Republic of China and The Russian Federation as Strategic Allies."

In the past decade US military [strategy](#) has identified almost everything as potential threats to be repulsed by the military—climate change, water scarcity, food costs, poverty, environmental degradation, political instability, cyber warfare, informational competition, and social tensions. Consequently, researchers are drawn from most academic disciplines, including religion and philosophy.

The social sciences are of particular interest to me, a political scientist. Anthropologists have been particularly critical of their discipline's militarization, and have protested collaboration with [Project Camelot](#) and [Human Terrain Systems](#). The works of [Catherine Lutz](#) and [Hugh Gusterson](#), and David Price's, [Weaponizing Anthropology](#), are particularly informative. The American Anthropological Association agreed that these projects violated anthropology's ethics. In addition to the required secrecy, anthropologists are not supposed to change or convert subjects of research.

Political science, however, has no ethics. The purveyors of conversion tactics have the greatest distinction in the discipline: “democratization, i.e., capitalism,” “regime change,” “counterrevolution.” Accordingly, since 1945 “national security” programs in political science have increasingly outshone and attracted students and professors, as opposed to more traditional political science concerns, such as peace, people’s power, and the good life. Graduate students are aware of job opportunities in the DoD (including the military’s own academies, e.g., the Army War College), research and development private contractors, think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and university programs and institutes such as The Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas.

An interesting example of spillover is the [Urban Dynamics Institute](#) at Oakridge National Labs, originally part of the Manhattan Project, and now engaged in research for understanding, predicting, and resolving key urban problems.

A DARPA contract employed a social psychology professor with a specialization in religion for a study: “Developing and Signaling Trust in Synthetic Autonomous Agents.” Research has indicated that religious people are often opposed to using robots and cyborgs for warfare, and this opposition is a threat to military plans, so means of countering this threat must be discovered by scientists.

Social scientists may still pursue classified research for DARPA, other DoD agencies, and the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA). However, the [Minerva Research Initiative](#) was created to allay the criticism of secrecy, and its projects are unclassified. Most of the principal investigators are based at US universities, but some are at foreign ones, and teams, often international, are encouraged.

Recent projects include “Russia’s malign influence campaigns,” and suggests we must avoid our “demonstrably ineffective practices as countering disinformation with truth and evidence.” Another indicates that military deployments overseas “other than invasions” lead foreigners to have a more positive view of the US. Still another seeks to determine how the US can deal with the threat to its global leadership from “rising power alliances,” especially the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

Despite the enthusiastic publicity and the generous funding—in January the DoD announced \$20.8M in Minerva grants—the US Joint Forces Command isn’t very impressed. One of its early program [evaluators](#) said “Most seem to be empty exercises in pedanticism, devoid of context or relevance.”

A more recent team [evaluation](#) from the National Academy of Sciences stated: “evaluating a program’s causal effects requires an analysis of the ‘counterfactual,’ that is, estimation of what would have happened in the absence of the program. The committee determined that the available data were not adequate for this.” Nevertheless, it was positive about the program and the dissemination of its research in scholarly publications and to non-academic audiences in “*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, *Scientific*

American, The Atlantic, Cipher Brief, The Wire, McLeans, The National Interest, and Politico, as well as international publications.”

DoD staff members among the evaluators wondered if social scientists might stay away from national security funded research because it could harm their professional reputation. However, the consensus did not find it a problem. “When grantees were asked about challenges associated with conducting (unclassified) research relevant to national security, only 12 percent mentioned criticism from academic colleagues due to DoD funding, which suggests that these types of concerns are not pervasive.”

On the other hand, a Social Science Research Council symposium conducted at the outset of the Minerva Initiative found apprehension from some scholars. Professor Catherine Lutz stated it plainly:

The first [danger] is that the Pentagon frames the questions to be asked and decides which independently framed questions are sensible or important, and does both these things within the constraints of what C. Wright Mills years ago called the military definition of reality. This entails seeing the world as a series of threats to be dealt with, sorting people into enemies and allies, and focusing on the use or threat of force – physical (missile and machine gun fire), mental (psychological operations, public relations campaigns), and financial (enforcement of sanctions, bribery of local actors, arms deals).

Another symposium participant, Prof. Ronald Krebs, in a later article warned: “Academic freedom, . . . seeks to free scholars from self-censorship as well, which can result not only from the fear of sticks but also from the lure of carrots.”

Thus echoing the concern of Prof. Lutz:

Faculty with Pentagon funding would have a leg up in recruiting graduate students, curricula would replace some existing courses. . . , and university administrators would reward, as they now do, those who bring in the money, public attention, and political connections that funding on high status subjects provides. Other, more pressing research and researchers will undergo a brain drain. The spaces for critique of war as a social practice will continue to contract.

The utility of the research findings may be minor, but the program can still be very useful to the military. There is more trickle down than trickle up. Academics come under the wing of the military budget, and they are not likely to flutter it too noticeably, or look too closely at the worldwide operations of our armed forces. An international elite of DoD and NATO funded scholars will see their sponsors’ aims as necessary and proper, and are likely to convey a militarized view of life to the media, politicians, and the younger generation of students.

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