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What Militarism Means

By William S. Lind

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When we think of militarism, Prussians in spiffy uniforms goose-stepping down Unter den Linden probably comes to mind. Prussia's fixation on her army was less an "ism" than a product of her geography, which stranded the country between two great land powers, France and Russia, with no natural defenses on her borders. Nonetheless, a cartoon from the Kaiser's time depicts such militarism well. It shows a Berlin street full of people in various uniforms, all staring pop-eyed at a man in a suit. The caption reads, "A civilian! A civilian!"

A book a friend recommended offers a supplementary definition of militarism, one that touches closer to home for Americans. The work, *A History of Militarism* by Alfred Vagts, was first published in 1937. Vagts makes an important distinction at the outset:

Every war is fought, every army is maintained in a military way and in a militaristic way. The distinction is fundamental and fateful. The military way is marked by a primary concentration of men and materials on winning. ... Militarism, on the other hand, presents a vast array of customs, interests, prestige, actions and thought associated with armies and wars and yet transcending true military purposes. Indeed, *militarism is so constituted that it may hamper and defeat the purposes of the military way* [emphasis added].

Modern militarism has ... specific traits ... modern armies ... are more liable to forget their true purpose, war, and the maintenance of the state to which they belong. Becoming narcissistic, they dream that they exist for themselves alone ... perpetuating themselves for the purpose of drawing money.

This definition of militarism is alive, well, and running the show on Capitol Hill and in the Pentagon. As Vagts warns, the result is not merely the waste of some hundreds of billions of dollars. Much of that money is spent in ways that work against military effectiveness, against the ability of our armed forces to win. Vagts reminds us: "The acid test of an army is war—not the good opinion it entertains of itself. ... War is the criterion, and war only. The rest is advertisement." [1]

As it happens, the U.S. armed services are sponsoring the poster child for such "advertisement" and for the militarism that undermines Vagts's military way. Its name is the F-35.

The F-35 airplane, a fighter/bomber, is the most expensive weapons program in American history. In April, the GAO released its latest report on the F-35 program. Its findings, which are—or should be—devastating, include:

- Procuring the F-35 will cost nearly \$400 billion and require annual funding of, on average, \$12.4 billion a year through 2038. "In addition, DOD and program office estimates indicate that the F-35 fleet could cost around \$1 trillion to operate and support over its lifetime, which will pose significant affordability challenges."
- The program has been restructured three times since 2001. We were originally to procure 2,852 airplanes for \$196.6 billion. The latest "baseline," that of 2012, shows we will now buy 2,443 F-35s for \$335.7 billion.
- "As development flight testing continues, DOD is concurrently purchasing and fielding aircraft." In other words, we are buying F-35s before we know whether they will work.

Almost half of developmental testing remains to be done, and operational testing—determining if the plane works in combat, not just technically—has barely begun. By the time that testing is done, we will have bought 518 F-35s. (We’re already stuck with 110.) Uncle Sam is being played for Uncle Sucker.

- The manufacturer of the F-35 reports that less than 40 percent of its critical manufacturing processes can consistently produce parts within quality standards.
- “Program data shows that the reliability of the engine is very poor.” Two of the F-35’s three variants are obtaining only about 25 flight hours between engine failures—about what the primitive engines of the world’s first jet fighter, the German Me-262, were getting in 1944.

The GAO report does not address the issue of the F-35’s performance, but what is known makes the picture even bleaker. The F-35 has a higher wing loading than the infamous F-105—the “Thud” or “Lead Sled” to its pilots—which means it maneuvers like a brick. It has less than a 1:1 thrust-to-weight ratio, which compared to other fighters makes it Porky Pig. And its vaunted “stealth” anti-radar capabilities are a fraud because by now almost everyone has discovered how to cut through “stealth”—old-fashioned long-wave radars do it nicely.

Republicans in Congress continually call for reducing the federal deficit. Sloughing off this albatross would save a neat trillion. At the very least, congressional budget hawks should demand a fly-off, where the F-35 would have to prove it is a better fighter than our existing F-15s, F-16s, and F-18s. Will they? No. Some of those nice men in expensive suits standing at their office doors, checkbooks in hand, might go away.

The shape of American militarism is the enormous shadow cast by the F-35.