

Ten Reasons Why Militarism is Bad for the Environment*

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As the world faces war with Iraq, many are understandably concerned with the immediate horror that war would bring. Beyond these very real dangers, we should take this opportunity to re-examine whether militarism is a healthy thing for our society and our planet. Reducing dependence on the rule of force and de-militarizing society would not only make the world more peaceful *and* free up resources to address the underlying causes of terrorism, it would also have a dramatically positive impact on global health and the environment. Here are ten reasons why.

1. Militaries are notorious polluters.

According to geographer Joni Seager, “anywhere in the world, a military presence is virtually the single most reliable predictor of environmental damage.” Since the end of the Cold War, many plans to convert military bases to civilian use have been cancelled because the sites are contaminated beyond any hope of restoration. And military pollution isn’t limited to bases, it does significant damage to the environment at large. In the US – the world’s most oil-thirsty country – the largest single consumer of oil is the Pentagon. Together, the world’s militaries consume as much petroleum as Japan – the world’s second largest economy – and produce an estimated 6-10% of global air pollution. As Seager concludes: “Militaries...that have little else in common share a distinctive environmental sensibility – namely, one of disregard.”¹

2. Militarism robs other social needs.

As President Dwight Eisenhower said, “Every gun that is made, every warship fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed” – and, one should add, pressing environmental needs. In 2004, President Bush hopes to increase the US military budget to \$399.1 billion. Worldwide military spending – about \$798 billion in 2000 – has recently increased for the first time since the end of the Cold War. That’s a lot of money *not spent* on finding ways to reduce poverty, hunger, and environmental degradation. Allowing social ills such as poverty, illiteracy, and hunger to fester only deepens the disparities that often lie at the heart of many environmental problems. Since militaries are such notorious polluters, heavy military spending is also a dramatic pollution subsidy. It fosters a military culture that casts aside environmental concerns as not “serious” enough to warrant attention. As one American military commander put it, “We’re in the business of protecting your country, not protecting the environment.”²

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3. Nuclear weapons are an environmental catastrophe.

Nuclear weapons pose an environmental threat to humanity unprecedented in human history. Although the world escaped nuclear holocaust during the Cold War, the nuclear arms race has not stopped. India and Pakistan now have nuclear weapons and North Korea may have them as well. According to some estimates, the radiation from weapons testing alone will eventually cause about 2.4 million cancer deaths worldwide.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki offer a frightening reminder of the terror of nuclear weapons used in combat. A year after the US bombed the two cities, 140,000 were dead in Hiroshima and 70,000 in Nagasaki. Because of the much greater destructive capacity of modern nuclear weapons, a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan could kill up to 30 million people. A massive nuclear war involving half the world's weapons could trigger a worldwide "nuclear winter," blocking virtually all of the sun's light with debris, potentially for weeks, threatening everyone not killed directly in the blasts.³

4. Nuclear waste is an environmental catastrophe.

Even if they are never used, nuclear weapons leave in their wake wastes unlike any other in human history, remaining deadly for hundreds of thousands – sometimes millions – of years. There is no completely safe place for these wastes over geological time. A volcano erupted just 20 kilometers from Yucca Mountain in Nevada, where the US plans to store much of its nuclear waste, only 20,000 years ago, a mere blip on the geological timeline. Leaving such long-lived waste for future generations is profoundly irresponsible. The Soviet military is guilty of probably the single most egregious failure to contain nuclear waste (although the American record is far from spotless): dumping waste directly into Lake Karachay, creating what a Natural Resources Defense Council official has called "the most polluted spot on the planet." Standing at the shore of Lake Karachay for an hour would kill you within weeks.⁴

5. Military toxins poison the poor and people of color.

Those who pay the price for military pollution tend to be society's weakest and most vulnerable. For decades the US Army contaminated a poor and largely black neighborhood in Memphis, dumping chemical weapons and other hazardous toxics without informing the residents. Pollution by Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio has elevated the cancer rates and birth defects in the surrounding Latino neighborhoods. For more than fifty years, the US Navy has contaminated Vieques, Puerto Rico, leaving residents with cancer rates 26% higher than the Puerto Rican average. Sadly, the same pattern holds internationally. As Joni Seager observes, "most nuclear weapons in the United States and Europe have been tested on indigenous peoples' land with dramatic health consequences," most severely for women and children. Even within the US military, soldiers whose health is threatened by poisonous weapons such as Agent Orange and Depleted Uranium (DU) – not to mention combat – are disproportionately poor and people of color. For both civilians and the rank and file, the pattern is clear: the poor and marginalized are poisoned by the pollution of the rich and powerful.⁵

6. Militaries are exempt from environmental regulation.

Militaries are routinely exempted from environmental regulations in the name of “national security”. In the US, many major environmental laws give the military dramatic regulatory loopholes, including the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, Occupational Safety and Health Act, all laws governing nuclear activity and waste, and many more. As the Military Toxics Project and the Environmental Health Coalition observe, “These exemptions have serious consequences when ... the Department of Defense and Energy are the nation’s leading polluters.” Internationally, a treaty banning plastic dumping at sea explicitly exempts militaries – despite the fact that the US Navy alone dumps over 5 tons of plastic overboard daily – and agreements governing foreign military bases almost never include provisions for environmental protection. Although the Pentagon tries to put a green spin on its activities with initiatives such as “green bullets,” which pollute soil less than conventional lead bullets, it fiercely resists regulation and aggressively covers up information about its pollution. One person fired from a military facility for voicing concerns over environmental health likened the intimidation directed at him to the work of the KGB and the Gestapo, calling it a “police state”. An EPA official once described the Department of Energy’s attitude about regulation of their nuclear activities as: “Look, Buster, don’t bug me with your crap about permits. I’m building atomic weapons.”⁶

7. War destroys ecosystems and livelihoods.

From “carpet bombing” to “scorched earth” campaigns, war routinely leave ecosystems ravaged and agricultural livelihoods destroyed. In the Vietnam War, US Air Force planes that dropped Agent Orange were emblazoned with the slogan, “Only we can prevent forests.” Beyond the 19 million gallons of Agent Orange, the US dropped some 25 million bombs on South Vietnam, wiping out half of the mangrove forests and eliminating almost 5 million acres of forest. In Central America, sociologist Daniel Faber reports that “Vietnam-style ‘scorched earth’ operations and military maneuvers have obliterated vast agricultural lands and crucial ecosystems, pushing millions of refugees into overcrowded cities and overtaxed hillsides.” A US military official happily reported that in Honduras “you don’t need to worry...about the EPA or...the environmentalists. Those are not concerns down there.”⁷

8. War destroys health and sanitation infrastructure.

War undermines public health. This grim reality was on full display in the Gulf War. A UN observation team at the end of the war found that the “recent conflict has wrought apocalyptic results on the infrastructure” leaving “means of modern life support...destroyed or rendered tenuous.” By dropping 5,000 tons of bombs, allied forces destroyed water and sewage facilities, electrical generators, and communication centers. Raw sewage flowed into drinking water supplies, and public health systems collapsed. Security scholar Michael Klare writes that the wrecked “water, electricity, and transportation systems have resulted in extensive death, disease, and hunger.”⁸

9. War poisons many generations of civilians.

War is the curse that keeps on killing. Vietnamese parents and children today are still being poisoned by the 19 million gallons of Agent Orange the US dumped on them

during the war. Congenital birth defects more than tripled between 1966 and 1996, while Vietnamese women suffer spontaneous abortion and cervical cancer at rates among the world's worst. What's more, the country remains littered with unexploded weaponry. As one doctor put it, "No one can be certain when the war's remnants will disappear." In Iraq, allied forces fired between 320 and 350 tons of DU, and as a result radioactivity has been found in Iraq's ground water and both plant and animal tissues. The level of damage done by this "recycled" radioactive waste won't be fully understood for years, but we know that DU can cause kidney failure, cancers, reproductive problems, genetic damage, and weakened immune systems. The bombing of Iraq's oil infrastructure released thousands of tons of very toxic hydrocarbons and chemicals. Baghdad has seen dramatic increases of lead and particulate matter in the air. Infant mortality and death of children under five each doubled between 1989 and 1999, while birth defects have also dramatically increased. Since the war, cancer rates have gone up by five times, and cancer victims are getting younger. Dr. Huda Ammash describes the combined effects of war and sanctions as "a health crisis of immense proportions."⁹

10. War kills people.

Any environment with bullets whizzing and bombs dropping is polluted in the most lethal way. As the technology of warfare has advanced, the deadliness of humanity's militarism has grown by leaps and bounds. War killed up to 175 million people, most of them civilians, in the 20th century alone – history's most bloody century. We must work now to ensure that our present century is known for peace – not war.¹⁰

References

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