

Police, Prisons, and the Pentagon

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(Interjection – WOW this ONE article taking on THREE “Sacred Cow” issues: Pentagon Spending... a “pet issue” of my own which I hope 2020’s election will start changing... Police Over-militarization and the 1033 Program! ~ Don Chapin)



Defunding America's wars at home and abroad.

It's time to defund our wars, both at home and abroad. (Photo: Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Think of it as a war system that's been coming home for years. The murder of George Floyd has finally shone a spotlight on the need to defund local police departments and find alternatives that provide more genuine safety and security. The same sort of spotlight needs soon to be shone on the American military machine and the wildly well-funded damage it's been doing for almost 19 years across the Greater Middle East and Africa.

Distorted funding priorities aren't the only driving force behind police violence against communities of color, but shifting such resources away from policing and to areas like jobs, education, housing, and restorative justice could be an important part of the solution. And any effort to boost spending on social programs should include massive cuts to the Pentagon's bloated budget. In short, it's time to defund our wars, both at home and abroad.

The High Cost of Police and Prisons

In most states and localities, spending on police and prisons outweighs what the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., once [described](#) as "programs of social uplift." The numbers are staggering. In some jurisdictions, police alone can account for up to [40%](#) of local budgets, leaving little room for other priorities. In New York City, for instance, funding the police department's operations and compensation costs more than [\\$10 billion](#) yearly—more, that is, than the federal government [spends](#) on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nationwide, more than [\\$100 billion](#) annually goes into policing.

Now, add to that another [figure](#): what it costs to hold roughly [two million](#) (yes 2,000,000!) Americans in prisons and jails—roughly \$120 billion a year. Like policing, in other words, incarceration is big business in this country in 2020. After all, prison populations have grown by nearly [700%](#) since 1972, driven in significant part by the "war on drugs," a so-called war that has disproportionately targeted people of color.

The Elephant in the Room: Pentagon Spending

In addition to the police and prisons, the other major source of American militarized spending is, of course, the Pentagon. That department, along with related activities like nuclear weapons funding at the Department of Energy, now gobbles up at least [\\$750 billion](#) per year. That's [more than](#) the military budgets of the next 10 countries combined.

Just as prisons and policing consume a startling proportion of state and local budgets, the Pentagon accounts for [more than half](#) of the federal government's discretionary budget and that includes most government functions other than Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. As Ashik Siddique of the National Priorities Project has [noted](#), the Trump administration's latest budget proposal "prioritizes brute force and militarization over diplomatic and humanitarian solutions to pressing societal crises" in a particularly striking way. "Just about every non-militarized department funded by the discretionary budget," he adds, "is on the chopping block, including all those that focus on reducing poverty and [meeting human needs](#) like education, housing, labor, health, energy, and transportation."

Spending on the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and the deportation of immigrants through agencies like ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and Customs and Border Protection totals another [\\$24 billion](#) annually. That puts U.S. spending on police, prisons, and the Pentagon at nearly \$1 trillion per year and that doesn't even include the soaring budgets of other parts of the American national security state like the Department of Homeland Security ([\\$92 billion](#)) and the Veterans Administration ([\\$243 billion](#)—a cost of past wars). Back in May 2019, Mandy Smithberger of the Project on Government Oversight and I had already estimated that the full national security budget, including the Pentagon, was approximately [\\$1.25 trillion](#) a year and that estimate, of course, didn't even include the police and the prison system!

Another way of looking at the problem is to focus on just how much of the federal budget goes to the Pentagon and other militarized activities, including federal prisons, immigration enforcement, and veterans benefits. An [analysis](#) by the National Priorities Project at

the Institute for Policy Studies puts this figure at \$887 billion, or more than 64% of the federal [discretionary budget](#) including public health, education, environmental protection, job training, energy development, housing, transportation, scientific research, and more.

Making the Connection: The 1033 Program

Ever since [images](#) of the police deploying armored vehicles against peaceful demonstrators in Ferguson, Missouri, hit the national airwaves in 2014, the Pentagon's program for supplying "surplus" military equipment to local police departments has been a news item. It's also gotten intermittent attention in Congress and the Executive Branch.

Since 1997, the Pentagon's 1033 Program, as it's called, has channeled to 8,000 separate law enforcement agencies [more than \\$7.4 billion](#) in surplus equipment, including Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles of the kind used on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, along with rifles, ammunition, grenade launchers, and night-vision devices. As Brian Barrett has [pointed out](#) at *Wired*, "Local law enforcement responding to even nonviolent protests has often looked more like the U.S. Armed Forces." Political scientist Ryan Welch co-authored a 2017 [study](#) suggesting, when it came to police departments equipped in such a fashion, "that officers with military hardware and mindsets will resort to violence more often and more quickly."

Under the circumstances and given who's providing the equipment, you won't be surprised to learn that the 1033 program also suffers from lax oversight. In 2017, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) created a fake law enforcement agency and was able to [acquire](#) \$1.2 million worth of equipment through the program, including night-vision goggles and simulated M-16A2 rifles. The request was approved within a week of the GAO's application.

The Obama administration finally [implemented](#) some reforms in the wake of Ferguson, banning the transfer of tracked vehicles, grenade launchers, and weaponized aircraft, among other things, while requiring police departments to supply more detailed rationales

describing their need for specific equipment. But such modest efforts—and they proved modest indeed – were promptly [chucked out](#) when Donald Trump took office. And the Trump administration changes quickly had a discernible effect. In 2019, the 1033 program had one of its biggest years ever, with about [15,750](#) military items transferred to law enforcement, a figure exceeded only in 2012, in the Obama years, when 17,000 such items were distributed.

As noted, the mere possession of military equipment has been shown to stoke the ever stronger "warrior culture" that now characterizes so many police departments, as [evidenced](#) by the use of Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams armed with military weaponry for routine drug enforcement activities. It's hardly just SWAT teams, though. The weaponry and related items provided under the 1033 program are widely employed by ordinary police forces. NBC News, for instance, [reported](#) that armored vehicles were used at least 29 times in response to Black Lives Matter protests organized since the murder of George Floyd, including in major urban areas like Philadelphia and Cincinnati. NBC has also determined that more than 1,100 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles have been distributed to local law enforcement agencies under the MRAP program, going to communities large and small, including Sanford, Maine, population [20,000](#), and Moundsville, West Virginia, population [8,400](#).

A report from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has similarly documented the use of Pentagon-supplied equipment in no-knock home invasions, including driving up to people's houses in just such armored vehicles to launch the raids. The ACLU [concluded](#) that "the militarization of American policing is evident in the training that police officers receive, which encourages them to adopt a 'warrior' mentality and think of the people they are supposed to serve as enemies, as well as in the equipment they use, such as battering rams, flashbang grenades, and APCs [Armored Personnel Carriers]."

Who Benefits?

Companies in the military-industrial complex earn billions of dollars selling weapons, as well as building and operating prisons

and detention facilities, and supplying the police, while theoretically dealing with problems with deep social and economic roots. Generally speaking, by the time they're done, those problems have only become deeper and more rooted. Take, for example, giant weapons contractors like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Raytheon that [profit](#) so splendidly from the sales of weapons systems to Saudi Arabia, weaponry that, in turn, has been used to kill tens of thousands of civilians in Yemen, destroy civilian infrastructure there, and block the provision of desperately needed humanitarian assistance. The result: more than [100,000 deaths](#) in that country and [millions](#) more on the brink of famine and disease, including Covid-19.

Such major weapons firms have also been at the front of the line when it comes to benefiting from America's endless post-9/11 wars. The Costs of War Project at Brown University estimates that the United States has spent over [\\$6.4 trillion](#) on just some of those overseas conflicts since 2001. Hundreds of billions of those dollars ended up in the pockets of defense contractors, while problems in the U.S., left far less well funded, only grew.

And by the way, the Pentagon's regular budget, combined with direct spending on wars, also manages to provide huge benefits to such weapons makers. Almost [half](#) of the department's \$750 billion budget goes to them. According to the Federal Procurement Data System's latest [report](#) on the top recipients of government contracts, the five largest U.S. arms makers alone—Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics—split well over \$100 billion in Pentagon awards among them in 2019. Meanwhile, those same five firms pay their CEOs a total of approximately [\\$100 million](#) per year, with hundreds of millions more going to other top executives and board members.

Meanwhile, in the Trump years, the militarization of the border has become a particularly lucrative business opportunity, with General Atomics, for instance, supplying ever more [surveillance drones](#) and General Dynamics supplying an ever more intricate and expensive [remote sensor surveillance system](#). There are also millions to be made running privatized prisons and immigrant detention centers,

filling the coffers of firms like CoreCivic and the GEO Group, which have [secured](#) record profits in recent years while garnering about half their revenues from those two sources.

Last but not least is the market for even more police equipment. Local forces benefit from [grants](#) from the Department of Homeland Security to purchase a wide range of items to supplement the Pentagon's 1033 program.

The True Bottom Line

Much has been written about America's failed post-9/11 wars, which have cost trillions of dollars in taxpayer treasure, [hundreds of thousands](#) of lives (American and otherwise), and physical and psychological injuries to [hundreds of thousands](#) more. They have also propped up sectarian and corrupt regimes that have actually made it easier for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS to form and spread. Think of it as the ultimate boomerang effect, in which violence begets more violence, while allowing overseas terrorist organizations to thrive. As journalist Nick Turse has [noted](#) with respect to the militarization of U.S. Africa policy, the growth in American military operations on that continent has proceeded rather strikingly in conjunction with a proliferation of new terrorist groups. Put the best light on them and U.S. counterterror operations there have been ineffective. More likely, they have simply helped spawn further increases in terrorist activities in the region.

All of this has, in turn, been an ongoing disaster for underfunded domestic programs that would actually help ordinary Americans rather than squander their tax dollars on what passes for, but obviously isn't, "national defense." In the era of Covid-19, climate change, and an increased focus on longstanding structural racism and anti-black violence, a new approach to "security" is desperately needed, one that privileges not yet more bombs, guns, militarized police forces, and aircraft carriers but public health, environmental protection, and much-needed programs for quality jobs and education in underserved communities.

On the domestic front, particularly in communities of color, police are more often seen as an occupying force than a source of

protection (and ever since the 1033 program was initiated, they've looked ever more like such a force as well). This has led to calls for defunding the police and seeking other means of providing public safety, including, minimally, not sending police to deal with petty drug offenses, domestic disputes, and problems caused by individuals with mental-health issues. Organizations like the Minneapolis-based Reclaim the Block have put forward [proposals](#) for crisis response by institutions other than the police and for community-based programs for resolving disputes and promoting restorative justice.

Shifting Priorities

Sharp reductions in spending on police, prisons, and the Pentagon could free up hundreds of billions of dollars for programs that might begin to fill the gap in spending on public investments in communities of color and elsewhere.

Organizations like the Movement for Black Lives and the Poor People's Campaign are already demanding these kinds of changes. In its moral budget, a comprehensive proposal for redirecting America's resources toward addressing poverty and away from war, racism, and ecological destruction, the Poor People's Campaign calls for a [\\$350 billion](#) annual cut in Pentagon spending—almost half of current levels. Likewise, the platform of the Movement for Black Lives suggested a 50% reduction in Pentagon outlays. And a new youth anti-militarist movement, [Dissenters](#), has called for defunding the armed forces as well as the police.

Ultimately, safety for all Americans will depend on more than just a shift of funding or a reduction in police armaments. After all, George Floyd and [Eric Garner](#)—just two of the long list of black Americans to die at the hands of the police—were killed not with high-tech weapons, but with a knee to the throat and a fatal chokehold. Shifting funds from the police to social services, dismantling police forces as they now exist, and creating new institutions to protect communities should be an essential part of any solution in the aftermath of Donald Trump's presidency. Similarly, investments in diplomacy, economic assistance, and cultural exchange would be needed in order to help rein in the

American war machine which, of course, has been attended to in ways nothing else, from health care to schooling to infrastructure, has been in this century. When it comes to both the police and the Pentagon, the sooner change arrives the better off we'll all be. It's long past time to defund America's wars, both abroad and at home.



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