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## Opposing the Plutocracy Means Opposing the Warfare State

By Gary Chartier  
February 8, 2016

Bernie Sanders wants to stay on message. So his presidential campaign has focused on economic issues. The American economy is rigged, Sanders says, in the interests of the wealthy and well connected. Banks and Wall Street brokerage houses get what they want at the expense of everyone else. The government should step in on the side of ordinary people.

It's hard not to resonate with Sanders's message that the rules of the game are designed to benefit those best positioned to shape them. When power is concentrated in the hands of a few people, when there's one ultimate rule-making authority, politicians and their cronies can engage in self-dealing with relative impunity. Eliminating the privileges that prop up the crony class would likely prove more efficient and just than Sanders's proposals to increase the power of the state – which tends persistently to favor the well-connected. But you can find his prescription unappealing while appreciating his diagnosis.

Earlier candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination from their party's left, like George McGovern and Dennis Kucinich, addressed economic concerns while taking on war and the national security state. McGovern called, "Come home, America." Kucinich sought the impeachment of Vice President Dick Cheney. Opposing the War Party was high on their agendas. That seems less true of Sanders.

Sanders isn't a hawk. He opposed the invasion of Iraq and interventions in Libya and Syria. But he's not a consistent noninterventionist or opponent of the national security state. He favored invading Afghanistan and bombing Syria. He's even said he favors prosecuting courageous whistleblower Edward Snowden.

And he's missed out on an opportunity to challenge the warmongers precisely as a way of reducing economic inequity. The war-making budget, totaling in the vicinity of \$1 trillion (when Pentagon allocations are combined with interest payments and appropriations for military-related activities in other departments), is a huge source of revenue for the wealthy and well connected. No one wants to appear unconcerned about Americans' safety – though military spending does little to make us safe and, because war breeds ongoing resentment abroad, actually increases risks of military and terrorist violence – so politicians avoid challenging the overall level of “defense” spending. Vastly expensive projects funnel money to well-heeled corporations. And of course those corporations lobby very effectively to keep the money flowing their way. (Sanders also hasn't linked challenging the Pentagon with another of his key concerns. He's said he thinks the number one threat to American national security is global warming – without mentioning that the US military is the world's leader in greenhouse gas emissions.)

Military contracting isn't the only way in which war-making furthers the interests of the wealthy and well connected. After all, particular military interventions often serve to change regimes in ways that better the positions of American corporations. Think about United Fruit in Central America for long stretches of the twentieth century. As Medal-of-Honor-winning Marine Smedley Butler emphasized, the US military is repeatedly expected to carry water for corporate America. And while wars benefit the crony class, they are generally fought by the poor.

Money spent on war is wasted, since it could otherwise be put to economically productive uses. And it actually reduces prosperity globally: war destroys human and physical capital – not only injuring the immediate victims of military violence but retarding the growth of the global economy. But the evil of war persists, both because it furthers politicians' ambitions and because it pads the pocketbooks of their cronies.

Because war is a windfall for the well connected, Sanders could stay focused on his message of fighting economic inequity while urging the return home of American troops, the closing of American military bases around the globe, and dramatic reductions in the Pentagon budget. Doing so would even make it easier for him to argue for the expensive social welfare programs he's proposed, since sharp cuts in military spending would free up resources and obviate tax increases. And yet the phrase “military-industrial complex,” perfectly pitched to capture his concerns with plutocracy, has yet, as far as I know, to appear in one of his speeches.

Perhaps Bernie's simply not opposed to war and empire as deeply as McGovern and Kucinich were. Maybe he's judged that propaganda really has convinced Americans that perpetual global warfare is needed to keep them safe – that they just wouldn't support a candidate opposed to military spending. Or perhaps he's decided that, with a big-ticket military project in almost every House of Representatives district, his fellow Senators and Representatives won't jeopardize constituent bank accounts by reducing the Pentagon budget.

Whatever the case, he's missing out on the chance to change the national conversation and begin fixing the rigged economic game in a key area. Challenging elite privilege means confronting war and the national security state.