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A Global Movement to Confront Drone Warfare

By Medea Benjamin
July 25, 2017

The \$600 billion annual cost of the US military budget eats up 54% of all federal discretionary funds. It's no wonder we don't have money to address the crisis of global warming, build effective public transportation systems, institute a Medicare-for-All health system, or provide the free college education that all our youth deserve.

You would think it would be easy to form a united front with activists from different movements who want to redirect our tax dollars. Students fighting for free education should understand that stopping just one weapons system, the expensive and unnecessary Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter jets, would fund the education of all college students for the next two decades. Nurses fighting for universal health care should understand that if we cut the bloated military budget, we'd have plenty of money for a national healthcare system like the Europeans have. Environmentalists paddling their kayaks to block oil-digging ships should understand that if we dramatically cut our military spending, we'd have hundreds of billions of dollars to propel us into the era of green, sustainable energy. Unions should recognize that the military is one of the worst creators of jobs in relation to money spent.

It was easier to connect with other movements when the peace movement was strong while trying to stop George W. Bush's Iraq war. Students came to anti-war rallies calling for "Books not Bombs," nurses called for "Healthcare not Warfare," union leaders formed U.S. Labor Against the War. Globally, we universalized our protests, organizing a global day of action on February 15, 2003, a day that made the Guinness World Records as the largest demonstration in

world history. So strong was our movement that The New York Times called global public opinion the “second superpower.”

When Barack Obama was elected, the first casualty of his Presidency was the anti-war movement. People dropped out of the movement for a variety of reasons, but mainly because many people thought that Obama would end US military adventurism.

President Obama did achieve a few critical wins for diplomacy, but he invaded Libya, and he also championed a dangerous, new kind of remote controlled killing: drone warfare.

Drones were designed as a way to kill enemies with great precision without putting American troops at risk. But they kill many innocent people—and they stir up anti-American sentiment that fuels an endless cycle of violence.

Drones allowed the US military and CIA to intervene militarily with ease, even in places where we were not at war. These institutions operated secretly, without Congressional approval, and they lied to the public about the accuracy and effectiveness of drone strikes. We were appalled when a 2012 poll revealed that a whopping 83% of Americans supported the killing of “terrorist suspects” with drones. How could so many Americans think we had the right to murder people thousands of miles away who were never charged, tried, or convicted of anything? Our first reaction was, “How are we going to change public opinion so that we can change policy?” We never thought we could build a mass movement against drone warfare as we had built a movement against the Iraq war, but we did think that a small group of committed activists could help move public opinion and then influence government policy.

CODEPINK, along with groups like Veterans for Peace and Voices for Creative Nonviolence, set about educating the public on the horrors of drone warfare. We organized two Global Drone Summits in Washington DC; we wrote books, articles, and op eds; we traveled around the country giving talks at universities, churches, and community centers. We protested at dozens of private and government entities connected with killer drones: the White House, the CIA, the Pentagon, Congress, factories and homes of drone manufacturers. We engaged the public by getting tens of thousands of people to sign petitions, and call the President and their Congressional representatives. We encouraged drone pilots to quit and become whistleblowers, and amplified the voices of those who did.

Civil disobedience was a key component of our campaign. We disrupted Congressional testimonies by drone czar John Brennan and Secretary of State John Kerry. We organized die-ins at the CIA. The most creative resistance happened at US military bases where drones were piloted. Hundreds of people were arrested at the bases. Some went to jail for just a day and others for as long as 6 months.

One way this campaign universalized resistance was by connecting with the families of drone victims. We took delegations to Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In Yemen, among the family members we met was Mohammad Al-Qawli, whose innocent brother had been killed by a drone while driving his taxi, leaving behind a young wife and three children. Visibly angry, Al-Qawli told us the Americans refused even to explain why his brother was killed. “In our culture when

someone commits a crime or a terrible mistake, they have to acknowledge what they did, apologize, and compensate the family,” he said. “Could it be that my tribal culture is more evolved when it comes to justice than the USA?”

In Pakistan, we learned that drones had attacked weddings, funerals, markets, and schools, terrorizing entire communities. “To Americans, we are disposable people; our lives are worth nothing,” an irate young man told us.

We were so moved by hearing directly from these families that we brought some of them to the United States to hold press conferences and speak before Congress. In 2013, the Rehman family—a father with his two children—traveled from the Pakistani tribal territory to the U.S. Capitol to tell the heart wrenching story of the death of their 67-year-old grandmother. Listening to 9-year-old Nabila relate how her grandmother was blown to bits while picking okra softened the hearts of even the most hardened DC politicians. From the Congressmen to the translator to the media, tears flowed, and dozens of sympathetic stories appeared in the media.

With the globalization of the sale of drones, we also connected with groups in Europe, holding an international gathering that led to the formation of a European network to stop proliferation in their countries.

Our education campaigns, actions, and protests, while never constituting a mass movement and not successful in ending drone warfare, have had a major impact on both public opinion and policy. Public opinion in favor of drone warfare shifted from 83% in 2012 to 60% by 2014. President Obama was pressured to acknowledge and discuss the US drone program, promising that his Administration would reduce drone strikes and minimize civilian casualties. In Pakistan, strikes fell dramatically from a high of 128 in 2010 to 13 strikes in 2015.

In June 2016, the Administration released its first statistics on civilians killed by drones between 2009 and 2015 in areas “outside of active hostilities”: Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. The figures of between 64 and 116 casualties were far below calculations of nearly 1,000 made by reputable organizations like the UK’s Bureau of Investigative Journalism. Yet the fact that the Administration released any figures at all was the result of public pressure.

We were also successful in pushing for compensation for some of the families of innocent victims, which was especially critical for widows with no means to support their children.

As drones for other purposes proliferated at home, activists universalized resistance by making common cause with groups working on domestic issues. One connection was with people on the Left and Right concerned about privacy issues, as drones in the hands of anyone—from the FBI to neighbors to corporations—could be used to spy on people without their knowledge or consent. Another connection was with groups fighting the militarization of police forces, many of them activists related to the Black Lives Matter movement who worried about the police getting drones equipped with military styled weapons. In dozens of states, they formed coalitions that passed laws restricting the use of drones for surveillance and the weaponization of drones.

One other key connection emerged: people who went to prison for their anti-drone actions got a chance to see, firsthand, the similarities between the military–industrial complex and the prison–industrial complex, including how both profit from human suffering. On their release, many peace activists linked with groups fighting mass incarceration that supported former prisoners.

The peace movement has had many ebbs and flows since the 9/11 attacks. Resisting the Iraq war was so clear and urgent that it was possible to build universal resistance. Although we didn't stop the war, we did speed up public opposition, which helped to reduce military involvement and pave the way for the Iran nuclear deal.

At other times, as with Obama's secret drone killings, wars have been more covert, making it harder to build strong opposition. Yet making connections with other movements have been critical in counteracting the behemoth military–industrial complex. Moving forward, finding more effective ways of universalizing resistance to militarism across issues and continents, is key to building a more peaceful world.