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Military Spending is the Capitalist World's Fuel

By Pete Dolack
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It is common for activists to decry the enormous sums of money spent on the military. Any number of social programs, or schools, or other public benefits could instead be funded.

Not least is this the case with the United States, which by far spends the most of any country on its military. The official Pentagon budget for 2015 was \$596 billion, but actual spending is far higher. (Figures for 2015 will be used because that is the latest year for which data is available to

make international comparisons.) If we add military spending parked in other portions of the U.S. federal government budget, we're up to \$786 billion, according to a study by the War Resisters League. Veterans benefits add another \$157 billion. WRL also assigns 80 percent of the interest on the budget deficit, and that puts the grand total well above \$1 trillion.

The War Resisters League notes that other organizations estimate that 50 to 60 percent of the interest would be more accurate. Let's split the difference — if we assign 65 percent of the interest payments to past military spending (midway between the high and low estimates), then the true amount of U.S. military spending was \$1.25 trillion. Yes, that is a gigantic sum of money. So gigantic that it was more than the military spending of every other country on Earth combined.

China is second in military spending, but far behind at US\$215 billion in 2015, according to an estimate by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Saudi Arabia (\$87.2 billion), Russia (\$66.4 billion) and Britain (\$55.5 billion) round out the top five. And lest we chalk up the bloated Pentagon budget to the size of the U.S. economy, the official \$596 billion budget constituted 3.5 percent of its gross domestic product, the fourth-highest ratio in the world, while China spent 2.1 percent of its GDP on its military. But if we use the actual total of U.S. military spending, then U.S. spending as a share of GDP leaps to second place, trailing only Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. maintains military bases in 80 countries, and has military personnel in about 160 foreign countries and territories. Another way of looking at this question is the number of foreign military bases: The U.S. has around 800 while the rest of the world combined has perhaps 30, according to an analysis published in *The Nation*. Almost half of those 30 belong to Britain or France.

Asking others to pay more is endorsing imperialism

Is there some sort of altruism in the U.S. setting itself up as the gendarme of the world? Well, that's a rhetorical question, obviously, but such self-deception is widespread, and not just among the foreign-policy establishment.

One line of critique sometimes heard, especially during this year's presidential campaign, is that the U.S. should demand its allies "pay their fair share." It's not only from Right-wing quarters that phrase is heard, but even from Left populist Bernie Sanders, who insisted during this month's Brooklyn debate with Hillary Clinton that other members of NATO ought to pay more so the Pentagon budget can be cut. Senator Sanders said this in the context of pointing out the superior social benefits across Europe as compared to the U.S., but what it really implies is that militarism is justified.

Setting aside that Senator Sanders' record on imperialism is not nearly as distant from Secretary Clinton's as his supporters believe, it is a reflection of how deeply imperialism is in the bones of United Statesians when even the candidate positioning himself as a Left insurgent doesn't seriously question the scale of military operations or their purpose.

So why is U.S. military spending so high? It's because the repeated use of force is what is necessary to maintain the capitalist system. As top dog in the world capitalist system, it's up to the U.S. to do what is necessary to keep itself, and its multi-national corporations, in the driver's seat. That has been a successful project. U.S.-based multi-nationals hold the world's highest share in 18 of 25 broad industrial sectors, according to an analysis in *New Left Review*, and often by commanding margins — U.S. multi-nationals hold at least a 40 percent global share in 10 of those sectors.

A partial list of U.S. interventions from 1890, as compiled by Zoltán Grossman, a professor at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington state, lists more than 130 foreign military interventions (not including the use of troops to put down strikes within the U.S.). Consistently, these were used to impose U.S. dictates on smaller countries.

At the beginning of the 20th century, U.S. President William Howard Taft declared that his foreign policy was “to include active intervention to secure our merchandise and our capitalists opportunity for profitable investment” abroad. Taft overthrew the government of Nicaragua to punish it for taking a loan from a British bank rather than a U.S. bank, and then put Nicaragua's customs collections under U.S. control and handed two U.S. banks control of Nicaragua's national bank and railroad. Little has changed since, including the overthrows of the governments of Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1964) and Chile (1973), and more recently the invasion of Iraq and the attempted overthrow of the Venezuelan government.

Muscle men for big business

We need only recall the statement of Marine Corps general Smedley Butler, who summarized his highly decorated career in 1935, in this manner:

“I spent thirty three years and four months [in] the Marine Corps. ... [D]uring that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism.”

The bipartisan refusal to acknowledge this is exemplified in U.S. narratives concerning the Vietnam War. The “debate” that is conducted in the corporate media is only between two “acceptable” viewpoints — an honorable effort that tragically failed or a well-intentioned but flawed effort that should not have been undertaken if the U.S. was not going to be “serious” about fighting. Never mind that tonnage of bombs dropped on Vietnam were greater than what was dropped by all combatants in World War II combined, 3 million Vietnamese were killed, cities were reduced to rubble and millions of acres of farmland was destroyed. By what sane measure could this be said to be fighting “without really trying,” as Right-wing mythology still asserts?

No modern corporate enterprise would be complete without subcontracting, and the Pentagon has not stinted here. That is not a reference to the massive, and often guaranteed, profits that military contractors enjoy as more supply operations are handed over to connected companies, but rather to the teaching of torture techniques to other militaries so that some of the dirty work of maintaining capitalism can be undertaken locally.

The U.S. Army's infamous School of the Americas, lately masquerading under the deceptively bland-sounding name Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, has long been a finishing school for the personnel enforcing the rule of military and civilian dictatorships throughout Latin America. Major Joe Blair, who was the director of instruction at the School of the Americas from 1986 to 1989, had this to say about the curriculum:

“The doctrine that was taught was that if you want information you use physical abuse, false imprisonment, threats to family members, and killing. If you can't get the information you want, if you can't get that person to shut up or stop what they're doing, you assassinate them—and you assassinate them with one of your death squads.”

The change of the name more than a decade ago was cosmetic, Major Blair said while testifying at a 2002 trial of School of the Americas protestors:

“There are no substantive changes besides the name. They teach the identical courses that I taught, and changed the course names and use the same manuals.”

The entire history of capitalism is built on violence, and violence has been used to both impose and maintain the system from its earliest days. Slavery, colonialism, dispossession of the commons, draconian laws forcing peasants into factories and control of the state to suppress all opposition to economic coercion built capitalism. The forms of domination change over the years, and are often financial rather than openly militaristic today (although the armed fist lurks in the background); regardless, exploitation is the lifeblood of wealth. Demanding that the cost of this should be spread around is a demand to continue exploitation, domination and imperialism, and nothing more.