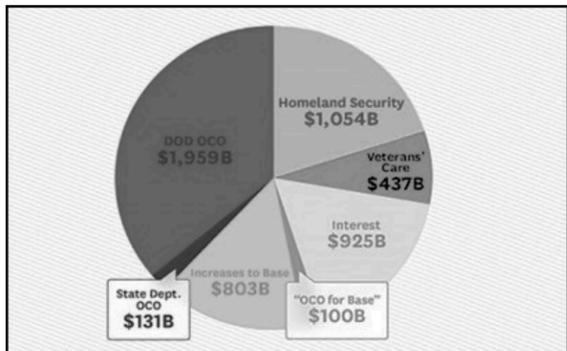


# DEMILITARIZE DEMOCRACY!

After 20 years of endless war in which trillions of dollars have been spent and hundreds of thousands have died the U.S. military has not been able to achieve anything approaching "victory" -- whatever that would even mean in our age of neoliberal hegemonic strategy.

The funds to deal with real threats to our safety, in defense of national security, from the pandemic to climate change, remains woefully inadequate.

Despite this the Pentagon continues to be funded at staggering levels. In good times and bad, the U.S. military and the "industrial complex," which President Dwight D. Eisenhower first warned us about in 1961, continues to maintain a central role in Washington. Even though they're remarkably irrelevant to the biggest challenges facing our democracy. Adding to the Pentagon budget, is almost the only subject the two parties in Congress can agree on.



**\*Estimate of U.S. War on Terror Spending in Billions**  
 FY 2001-2020 + 40 years of Veteran care = \$6.4 Trillion  
 OCO = Over Seas Contingency Operations

While it is an essential attribute of the American system that the military remains under civilian authority, it is completely normal for military and defense officials to weigh in endlessly on what once was civilian matters.

Before pursuing the second impeachment of Donald Trump, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi turned to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who isn't even in the civilian chain of command, to seek assurance that he could stop the president from starting a last-minute nuclear war. Retired military officers are regularly asked their opinions on subjects as varied as abortion rights, climate change, and childhood obesity. It's not, that such figures shouldn't be able, like anyone else, to offer their opinions or support on matters of public health and safety, but that their voices shouldn't matter more than those of public-health experts, scientists, medical professionals, or other civilians.

Who in the political class in the nation's capital wouldn't want a stamp of approval from dozens of generals, active or retired, endorsing their favorite initiative or candidate? This approval comes at a high price, undermining as it does the authority of civilian officials and agencies, while skewing resources toward the Pentagon that should be invested elsewhere to keep us truly safe.

In the last election season, long before the attack on the Capitol, there was already an intense national discussion about how to prevent violence at the polls, a conversation that all too quickly focused on what role the military should play in the process. General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was repeatedly asked to provide assurances that it would have no role in determining the outcome of the election. Meanwhile, some actually sought more military involvement. For example, in a widely debated "open letter" to Milley,

retired Army officers John Nagl and Paul Yingling stated that "if Donald Trump refuses to leave office at the expiration of his constitutional term, the United States military must remove him by force, and you must give that order." Proposals of this sort undermine the integrity of the many laws Congress and the states have put in place to prevent the military or armed vigilantes from playing any role in the electoral process.

Similarly, both former President Donald Trump and President Joe Biden have identified the military as a key future player in distributing the Covid-19 vaccine. This is something that could and should be handled by public-health institutions, if only they had adequate resources, like the Pentagon.

During and after the attack on the Capitol, officials from the military and national security worlds were consulted in discussions about the future of our democracy. Their opinions were sought out by the media and others on a wide range of issues that fell well outside their primary areas of expertise. A letter from 10 former secretaries of defense calling on the Republican caucus to respect the results of the election was given headline attention, while political figures pressed to have retired military officers involved in the January 6th assault tried in military, not civilian, courts.

Despite its failure to win a war in decades, according to polls the military remains one of America's most respected institutions -- getting the kind of appreciation that generally doesn't extend to other more successful public servants. After almost 20 years of forever wars, it's hard at this point to accept that the military's reputation for wisdom is deserved. Continually relying on retired generals and other present or former national security officials as validators effectively erodes the credibility of, and the public's trust in, other institutions that are meant to keep us healthy and safe.

In the Covid-19 moment, it should be clear that relying on narrowly defined notions of national security harms our democracy, a subject that none of those military or former military figures are likely to deal with. In all too many cases, current and retired military officials have abused the public trust in ways that call into question their right to serve as judges of what's important, or even to imagine that they could provide objective advice.

Far too many high-ranking officers on leaving the military, pass through the revolving door of the military-industrial complex into positions, as executives, lobbyists, board members, or consultants for the defense industry. They work on behalf of firms like Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and General Dynamics that receive a combined \$100 billion annually in Pentagon contracts with little accountability, even as they remain key go-to media figures.

They then use their former rank and the prestige attached to it, to lobby Congress and influence the media on the need for endless wars and an ever-increasing military budget. This is to support major weapons programs like Lockheed Martin's troubled F-35 Joint Strike Fighter without bothering to disclose that they stand to gain financially from the positions they're taking. The prospect of a fat salary in the weapons sector upon retirement also exerts an unhealthy influence on officers still serving in the military. They don't want to anger, or in any way alienate, their potential future employers.

When civilian voices and policies are eclipsed as the central determinants in how our democracy should op-



erate, a larger dilemma arises. That is, continuing to rely on the military as a primary source of judgment for what's right or wrong in the civilian world risks politicizing the armed forces. There are also high costs to be paid for relying on the Department of Defense to handle problems that have nothing to do with its primary mission. Using the armed forces as key players in addressing crises that aren't military in nature only further undermines civilian institutions and is often counterproductive as well.

In the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of politicians called for Trump to use the Defense Production Act (as Biden did indeed do). They called for the Department of Defense to ramp up the production of N95 masks, ventilators, and other personal protective equipment. The story of what happened to such funds in the Trump years should be telling. The Washington Post discovered that \$1 billion in supposed pandemic relief money was instead funneled directly to defense contractors and \$70 million of the funds the Pentagon spent went to ventilators that proved unfit for Covid-19 patients. While some of that money did go to bolster mask supply chains, another investigation discovered that such efforts did not come close to addressing national shortfalls and amounted to less than the department spends on instruments, uniforms, and travel for military bands.

By now, two decades into the twenty-first century, it's clear that more money for the Pentagon hasn't made this country safer. It has, however, helped give the military an ever more central role in our previously civilian political world. Biden's selection of retired General Lloyd Austin III to be secretary of defense only emphasizes this point. While it's certainly laudatory to appoint the first Black leader to that position, Austin has retired so recently that he needed a congressional waiver from a law requiring a seven-year cooling off period before taking up such a civilian post (just as Mattis did four years ago) - another sign that civilian control of the military is continuing to weaken. Additionally, now that he has retired from his role in private industry, Austin stands to make up to \$1.7 million, when he divests his stock holdings in Raytheon Technologies.

The immediate crises of the American republic should be clear enough right now: responding to the pandemic and restoring our civilian democracy. More Pentagon spending and more military influence will not, in the end, make us any safer. As the Biden years begin, it's time to give some serious thought to how to demilitarize our democracy.

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